I'm in LOVE with the VILLAINESS
NOVEL
1
Written by INORI
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Lene Aurousseau
Claire François
Rae Taylor
Misha Jur

I'm in LOVE with the VILLAINESS

NOVEL

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WRITTEN BY
Inori

ILLUSTRATED BY
Hanagata

Seven Seas Entertainment

WATASHI NO OSHI WA AKUYAKU REIJOU

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Illustrated by Hanagata

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Chapter 1:
Transmigration to Dating Sim

"TO THINK A COMMONER would even fathom sitting next to me. Know your place!"

When the young lady with golden curls spat these words at me, I didn't really understand what was happening. She looked at me as if the very sight of my face infuriated her. I told myself to stay calm and assess the situation. Nothing good could come of panic.

I was seated in what looked like a typical high school classroom. It had far fewer desks than the high school I'd gone to, giving it a spacious feel, though a crowd had now formed around the girl with golden curls and myself. The problem was that no one I could see, including the young lady, looked even remotely Japanese.

Putting the young lady aside for the time being, I racked my memories to retrace my steps. I remembered finishing up some overtime work at the small business that employed me and then settling down to play a game. I didn't have many hobbies, so my only real pastime was playing games; I loved everything from traditional board games like *shogi* and *go* to MMOs with beautiful 3D graphics.

My favorite games, though, were dating sims—the kind where you played as the heroine and got to romance a bunch of boys—though I tended to play them a little differently from most…

That was when I recognized the girl in front of me.

"Ahh," I said. "Claire?"

"Well, I never! Who do you think you are, calling me by my first name?!"

That shrill voice was unmistakable. The girl with the golden curls was Claire François, a character in one of my favorite dating sims, *Revolution*.

But that would mean… It couldn't be, could it? Had I been transported to a different world?

"Miss Claire."

"That's better," Claire huffed. "A commoner should show respect."

"Do you remember my name?"

"Are you stupid? You're Rae Taylor."

Revolution let you select the heroine's first name, but her last name was fixed as Taylor. *My* name was Rei Ohashi. If I was Rae Taylor here—then this world was the stage where the game was set, and I was now its heroine.

It seemed I really *had* been transported to a different world.

"Yes!"

"What are you going on about?" Claire muttered, but I wasn't paying attention. How many times had I fantasized about being transported into the game world, just like this? I could communicate with *any* character now, not just the ones the game allowed you to. And—

"Miss Claire."

"What is it? It is most displeasing to have a commoner think she can simply call out to me."

"I like you."

"Huh?" Claire looked puzzled.

"Miss Claire, I love you."

"Wh…wh-wh-what…?!"

As my words sank in, Claire rapidly grew flustered. She really was too cute.

My favorite character in *Revolution* wasn't one of the boys the game set you up to choose from. It was Claire. Claire François, the villainess who bullies the heroine, becomes her rival, and finally loses to her.

This was Claire. This was the villainess, and I was completely smitten.

She had a shrill voice and thoroughly malicious demeanor, but even though she was standing before me in the flesh, remembering the game made me grin.

I could never find it in me to hate Claire. Her towering pride, the threatening gestures she made to hide the fact that she was easily hurt, her jealous rage after losing her love to another—those uniquely human qualities pushed all my buttons just right. If anything, it was the most popular male love interest who made me uncomfortable. The game made him out to be some kind of saint, and it was just a bit much for me.

"What in the world are you talking about?!"

"I just love you, that's all."

"Hmph! The likes of a commoner trying to get on my good side? Don't waste your time." Claire turned away in a huff.

"You're so cute." Oops—the words were out of my mouth before I could stop them.

"Wh…wh-wha…!" Claire looked even more upset. "You… Are you trying to say you're batting for *that* team?"

"Ah, I'm… Well, it doesn't matter. I mean, it's irrelevant to cuteness—because, Miss Claire, you are cute."

"Huh?!" She pulled away. It was perfect—such a pure reaction.

"Miss Claire, you hate me, right?"

"Of course!"

"That's fine. Please keep teasing me. I love it."

"Wh-what in the world…?" Claire was starting to look seriously weirded out.

"Now, let's get this super-fun school life started, Miss Claire! We're going to have a great time!"

“What makes you think I’ll have anything to do with you?!”

And that was how I kissed my life of daily overtime goodbye and found myself in a place where I could spend every day with my beloved Claire, able to dote on her to my heart’s content.

My future was looking bright.

***

“Rae, I heard what you did. Don’t tell me you really attracted Claire’s attention on your first day of school?”

That mature, husky voice belonged to my roommate, Misha Jur. Her long, straight blonde hair swayed as she sat down on her bed in the room we shared in the Royal Academy dormitory.

The room was about two hundred square feet in size, with a desk for each of us and bunk beds that didn’t take up much space. The furnishings and decor were simple. It differed from modern dormitories in Japan in that everything was antique, but it was otherwise essentially the same.

Revolution was set at the Royal Academy, the most prestigious boarding school in the Bauer Kingdom. Regardless of family or financial status, students were treated as equals once enrolled in the Academy, so we all got assigned double rooms.

“I don’t know. Did I get her attention, or did she get mine?”

“What are you doing, Rae?” Misha sighed and looked down, exasperated. “You should stay away from House François. They eat ordinary people like you for breakfast.”

The noble house of François—Claire’s family—were one of the most famous in the country. They had headed up the

Ministry of Finance for generations, placing them behind only the king and prime minister in terms of power and influence. And that was before you factored in all their intermarriage with the royal family.

While *Revolution* was set in a world similar to that of medieval Europe, the politics of the Bauer Kingdom, where the game was set, were noticeably corrupt. Nobles inherited most of the key positions in the country, and important government officials were appointed due to their personal connections. The disparity between the aristocracy and the commoners widened by the year, and the peoples' discontent was so great that it was difficult to ignore.

This concerned the king, who began to promote a meritocratic policy. The idea was to vigorously promote talented people, regardless of family or financial status; the scholarship system at the Royal Academy was part of this policy's implementation. Talented students who couldn't otherwise afford higher education were granted government scholarships and allowed to enroll.

One of the students selected by this system was my character.

"But Misha, I love Miss Claire."

"That selfish brat? You're weird, Rae. To an aristocrat like her, scholarship students like us are nothing but obscene upstarts."

The scholarship system had gained the support of the commoners but been poorly received by the aristocracy. Nobles, who valued tradition and formality above all else, couldn't stand the thought of ordinary people attending the prestigious Royal Academy.

Misha was also a scholarship student. Her house had been noble in her childhood but had fallen into financial ruin; perhaps because of this experience, she was adamant she understood the nature of the world better than other nobles. At the very least, since we had attended the same commoner finishing school, she saw me for who I was without bias.

Unfortunately—I don't know if you'd call this pessimism or something else—she was a little bit *too* helpful sometimes.

"I don't mind being hated. Actually, I prefer it. It's the best way to be avoided," I said.

"You really have no idea what you're doing."

"Hey, what do you think the best way to maximize my time with Miss Claire would be?"

"Were you always such a pain in the butt?" Misha held her head in her hands as if she had a headache. "I suppose you'd need to be someone Miss Claire couldn't ignore."

"What do you mean?"

"Miss Claire is proud, right? She's never satisfied unless she's number one. So if you improve your skills and show her what you've got, she won't be able to dismiss you anymore."

"That's it!"

It was so simple. If I just went about things the same way I would if I were actually playing the game, Claire would *have* to keep paying attention. The harder I worked, the more severe her bullying would become. She was the persevering type, so she wouldn't back down—she would torment me, and I would dote on her. It was a win-win situation.

"Thanks, Misha. I can always count on you."

"I don't get it. All I did was tell you how to make her hate you." Misha couldn't hide her confusion, but, well, I couldn't say I didn't understand her confusion.

"Spending every day teasing and being teased by Miss Claire…such bliss."

"Seriously, what has gotten into you…?"

***

As I walked down an Academy hallway, someone slammed into me from behind. I almost fell but caught myself just in time.

“Oh, I beg your pardon? You were standing there staring off into space, so I thought you were a statue.”

I turned to find my beloved Claire. She was a picture-perfect villainess as she stood there with one hand on her mouth, all smug giggles. This was going to be my new normal.

“Miss Claire…”

“What? Don’t bother asking for an apology. Like I would ever apologize to a daydreaming peasant.”

“You’re great!”

“Huh?” Claire looked like a pigeon nailed by a BB gun.

“You have minions that could do your bidding, but you do your own dirty work and don’t rely on others! I would expect nothing less from you, Miss Claire.”

“Huh…? Huh?”

“Just as I thought, you’re no ordinary bully. I love you so much, Miss Claire!”

“Wh-what are you…?” Claire abruptly fled the scene, muttering something about being creeped out.

“Oh, there she goes.”

“Why do you look so disappointed?” Misha asked, looking dumbfounded.

“Hmm? Because Miss Claire didn’t stay to taunt me, obviously.” I sighed. “Don’t you think Miss Claire is especially radiant when she’s insulting me?”

“At least you’re aware you’re being bullied…” Misha sighed too, apparently somewhat relieved. “C’mon, we need to hurry to the lecture hall. Class is about to start.”

“Ohhh, beg your pardon. I thought you were an insect.”

Such went the time Claire stepped on my foot.

“Please…”

“Huh? I can’t hear you, peasant. If you have something to say, speak up!”

“If you must step on me, then please stomp harder!”

“Eh?!”

Claire was so precious when she was caught off guard.

Another time, Claire hid my textbook.

“What’s wrong with you? Is the peasant too poor to even buy books?”

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t realize how you felt, Miss Claire.”

“Huh?”

“You want to be with me all the time in class, right?! Yes, let’s share your book! We’ll be stuck to each other like glue!”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about!”

And another, we needed to find partners for an assignment.

“Oh, you don’t have a partner? That’s what happens when you’re a pathetic peasant.”

“It looks like Miss Claire will be my partner, Teacher.”

“I will not!”

“Hm?”

“Don’t play dumb with me!”

She ran away from me that time. Ahhh, she was killing me!

One day, she doused me with a bucket of water.

“Oh dear. You’re just so dirty that I thought you were mud.”

“It’s cold…”

“Oh ho ho. You poor thing!”

“Please warm me up!”

“Hey, don’t cling to me! Get off of me!”

She was so warm, so adorable. “Oh ho ho. This feels so good!”

And once, a flower vase was placed on my desk.

“A gift from Miss Claire!”

“No, it’s not!”

“I will press the flower and carry it with me always!”

“Why would I ever give *you* a flower?!”

“Did that hit on the head make you an idiot?!”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

It was after class. Claire stomped her foot as if she were having a temper tantrum; she was obviously displeased all her bullying seemed to be in vain, but I was just being genuine about my feelings.

Tangentially, I had noticed that even in this fantasy world, Claire’s tactics were of the variety you’d see in a typical Japanese school…probably because *Revolution* was made by a Japanese company.

“How are you so calm when I’m so mean to you?!”

“Mean? Isn’t this just your way of telling me you love me?”

“It is *not*!”

“So then what is it?”

“Why are you so weird with me?!” Claire’s shoulders shook, her breathing heavy. She reacted to absolutely everything, which was what made it too fun to tease her! “If you still don’t get it after everything I’ve done, let me give it to you straight.”

Claire fixed me with her sharp eyes as if I were a bug and she were the pin.

“This Academy is no haven for upstart peasants like you. Know your place and return to your life of menial labor!”

“My only job is to love you, Miss Claire… No, I am at your service.”

“Ugh. I’ve had enough…” Tears started to form in her eyes.

“Miss Claire, don’t lose heart. Slow and steady wins the race.”

“Seriously, what in the world are you thinking?!” Claire wailed and then left with her entourage at her heels.

“Hmph. She’s so childish.”

“I must agree with Miss Claire on this.” Even Misha was siding with her now!

“Ah ha ha. Don’t be silly, Misha.”

“What do you mean?”

“You don’t think this is all I’ve got, do you?”

“Would you be serious for one second? Aren’t you getting tired of this weird game of yours?”

“Nope, not at all.”

“Does this have anything to do with your bizarre notions of love?”

“A bit. I have my reasons.”

Claire was the villainess; there was no denying that. But I loved the way she went about her villainy. She did all her bullying herself, never calling on her minions to do it for her. That couldn’t be typical for an aristocrat. She was careful

never to go too far. When she pushed me in the hallway, it was never by any dangerous stairs or corners, but in places where I'd be safe if I fell. Even with my textbook, she didn't throw it away or tear it—she just hid it.

Of course, this was probably modern Japanese sensibilities at work, but I was in a world those sensibilities had made, and I was indeed being bullied. I wasn't trying to make excuses for my perpetrator—it just really, truly, made me happy to be Claire's target.

"How do you think she'll come at me tomorrow?"

"I have no idea."

I was thoroughly enjoying my life in this new world.

***

"Good morning, Miss Claire."

Claire and her entourage were sitting in the front row when I entered the lecture hall, so I happily went to greet her. The lecture hall was twice as large as the ones at the high school I'd attended, and the rows got higher toward the back. A blackboard and teacher's lectern stood in the front.

When I tried to approach Claire, her minions blocked my way.

"Would you stop talking to us like we're friends? We live in a different world than you. Isn't that right, Miss Claire?" one of them sneered. As if that had broken a dam, the others members of the entourage joined in a flood of agreement.

"Ahhh. I don't have anything to say to you, minions. I'm speaking to Miss Claire. Good day, Miss Claire."

"Wha?! Ingrate! Who do you think I am? I am of House Kugret, who have served the François family for generations!"

"So…minion, am I right?"

“M-Miss Claire…” The daughter of the Kugret family went crying to Claire. What a wimp.

“Ugh, peasant…” Claire sighed. “Get over yourself. She has nothing to say to you. Don’t you know ‘good day’ is used as a parting term?”

This was exactly what I was talking about. The minions just didn’t cut it—they couldn’t hold a candle to Claire’s abuse. For the record, there are many uses for “good day.” In present-day Japan it was perfectly acceptable to use it in place of “good morning” or “hello.”

“Oh, but whenever Claire talks to me, she teaches me the correct way to use words. I do love her so,” I mused.

“J-just shut up! Are you taunting me?!”

“Yes!”

“You don’t even hesitate?!”

It was a delicious reaction. Another glorious day.

“Control yourself, Rae. Good morning, Miss Claire.” Misha caught me by the collar.

“Mishaaa, let go of me. I’m playing Miss Claire now.”

“You forgot the ‘with’!” Claire was so good at comedic retorts.

“That’s enough.” Misha smacked me in the head.

“Misha…control your kitten, would you?” Claire demanded.

“Miss Claire, Rae is not my pet.”

“I would love to be *your* pet, Miss Claire.”

“Weren’t you told to shut up?!” Claire screamed, which left her out of breath.

“Miss Claire, you don’t seem well. You should get some rest,” I said.

“And whose fault is that?! Just get out of here!”

I sighed. As I expressed my disappointment, I heard a soft, tenor voice say, “A bit early to be so deep into your comedy routine, isn’t it?”

“Master Yu…”

“Good morning, Claire. I haven’t seen you fall apart like this in a long time.”

The person chuckling at us was the third-born prince of the kingdom, Yu Bauer. He had soft, curly blond hair and a gentle but cheerful smile, the very image of the ideal prince. Even his voice was perfectly prince-like.

Yu was one of the romanceable characters in the game. He was the second-most popular of the three love interests, all because he said things like “You’re so cute,” and “I will protect you,” or “I would love to marry into your family.”

“Master Yu, that’s not what I’m doing! This peas—Rae is acting disrespectfully, so I was warning her to watch herself.”

“Is that so?” Yu turned his gaze toward me.

“I wasn’t being disrespectful. Everything I said, I said out of love.”

“What in the world are you talking about?!”

Yu laughed at Claire’s outburst. “Rae Taylor, right? I remember you were at the top of the incoming class. I assumed you would be a bookworm, but you’re pretty funny, too.”

“Thank you.” Not being particularly interested in Yu, my reply was curt.

“Rae, don’t be rude, now,” Misha scolded. “Good morning, Master Yu.”

“Oh, Misha. Good morning.”

Yu was nice to everyone, but he was especially sweet to Misha. They’d grown up together and been very close before Misha’s family went bankrupt. Misha still missed their old relationship. If you chose to play Yu’s route in the game, you

not only had to deal with Claire's harassment, you had to navigate the conflict between your friendship with Misha and your yearning for Yu. The fanbase largely agreed it was the most complex scenario by far.

"I apologize for Rae. I will make certain to chastise her later," Misha told Yu.

"Don't worry about it. If anything, you could stand to speak to me less formally. We're all equal here at the Academy, you know?"

"I will consider it…"

Their awkward conversation went back and forth in that manner, but I was just grateful for the excuse to turn my attentions back to Claire. "Miss Claire, what do you think? Have they rekindled their love?"

"Why is every thought that goes through your head so vulgar?"

"Hey, Yu and Claire. Morning, everyone."

"Good morning, Master Rod."

"Good morning, Brother."

The lively voice that now greeted us belonged to a good-looking boy with spiky black hair. His name was Rod Bauer. He was the first-born prince of the kingdom and, of course, another of the game's romanceable male leads.

"What's going on here? It sounds interesting. I want in." Rod laughed as he sauntered into our circle like he owned it.

"There is absolutely nothing of interest here," said Claire. "Just one person who is trying to undermine the Academy's morals!"

"Does that mean what I think it means?" I said. "You want to join me? Shall we undermine them? Shall we totally undermine them together?"

"I will do no such thing!"

“What…?” Rod watched this exchange as if he had come upon a rare animal at the zoo.

The game usually required the player character to introduce herself at this point, but it was Yu who introduced me, instead. “This is Rae Taylor,” he said, chuckling. “She was at the top of the class of the incoming students. She’s pretty amusing.”

“Yes, she’s certainly possessed of an uncommon character. You don’t normally see her type among aristocrats. It seems my father’s policy has given us all a good laugh.”

“Heh.” I couldn’t tell if he meant that as a compliment, so I kept my response noncommittal.

“A refreshing reaction. Rae…I’ll remember that.”

“Thanks.”

“Rae, respectful, please,” Misha chided again.

“Do you know how many girls would kill to be remembered by Master Rod?” Claire demanded.

Misha and Claire were both mad at me now, but it couldn’t be helped. I loathed arrogant characters like Rod, who demanded you follow them without question, always progressing directly onward with their route. Rod had a confident and vibrant personality, but I had no idea why he was always voted the most popular character. Didn’t it get exhausting to spend so much time around someone like him? Well, my tastes were obviously different from most, since Claire attracted me far more than the romanceable characters.

“Come join us, Thane,” Rod called out.

“Nah, I’m fine.” A silver-haired boy lying face down on a desk in the back of the classroom answered grumpily.

“I don’t think Thane likes this sort of thing.”

“Is there anything he *does* like?” Yu laughed uncertainly while Rod wore a sour look.

As their ambiguous reactions suggested, Thane was considered something of a nuisance. He was the second-born

prince of the kingdom, and he was the final romanceable lead. He was also the least popular of the three. If Yu was prince-like and Rod was conceited, Thane was…complicated.

Yu was a natural-born genius who excelled at everything without putting in much effort. Rod was similarly brilliant, but he excelled at things because he worked hard. Thane, sandwiched between his talented brothers, was never the best at anything, even when he tried his hardest. The constant comparison to his brothers had given him a complex, keeping him from being genuine.

And yet, Thane was my favorite of the game's romanceable characters. I liked him for the same reason I liked Claire: they seemed human. Perhaps because I was no longer a daydreaming child but an adult who'd already had a taste of reality, I found tangible, flawed characters more attractive than those that just seemed superhuman.

"Master Thane…" My beloved Claire said his name with a hint of suppressed emotion.

The truth was that Claire felt the L-word for Thane, which was one of the reasons why his route was the least popular. Claire did stick her nose in every route just because she liked to meddle, but she grew genuinely glum when a player took the Thane route. Additionally, when you finished the game with a Thane romance, you were unable to really give Claire her comeuppance, instead saying, "I understand how you feel… You were hurt," and forgiving her. Similarly, the exhilaration that came with the conflict of other routes, like Rod's, was nonexistent in Thane's.

"Why don't you go talk to him, Miss Claire?" I said. Thane wasn't the type to take the initiative.

"Wh-why me?"

"You like him, don't you?" I regretted the words the moment they left my mouth, but it was too late.

"N-no! I don't think about Master Thane like that!" Claire shrieked.

Her voice echoed throughout the lecture room, meaning, of course, that it was audible to Thane. He picked himself up and left the classroom, his face expressionless.

“Oh… What should I do? I didn’t mean to…” Claire was flustered.

I really had messed this up.

“Let’s go apologize to him later, Miss Claire,” I said.

“And this peasant, acting like she knows things!”

“Miss Claire.” I focused on her, my voice controlled.

“Wh-what do you want?” she stammered.

“Master Thane is delicate.”

“I know that.”

“So you should apologize.”

“W-would you just shut up?!” Claire stood up abruptly. “I feel sick! I’ll be going home now!”

“O-oh, Miss Claire!”

“Please leave me alone!”

Claire didn’t even allow her entourage to follow her as she stormed from the lecture room. I watched her curls bounce as she left, filled with a sense of satisfaction. I said nothing, but I knew—I just *knew* she had gone after Thane.

This was exactly why she was cute. This was why I was infatuated with her.

***

“You sure are cheeky for a peasant!”

“Yes! Cheeky, that’s what I am. Please punish me more!”

The day I was transported to the game was the start of term at the Academy, the day of the entrance ceremony. It had

been a week since, and I was getting used to the school. My connection with Claire had also steadily deepened—in my opinion, anyway.

When I went to greet her, as I did every morning, her reaction was the same as always. Her entourage had given up, perhaps because I remained unaffected by their jibes. They lacked conviction; they could learn a thing or two from Claire. Not that I was complaining—it was far easier to talk to Claire now that her minions no longer got in my way.

"I won't be made a fool of every time!"

"Oh?"

There was something different about Claire today. She continued, smile unwavering. "You are aware of tomorrow's test, are you not?"

"Of course."

It wouldn't be much different from the exams I had taken in Japanese schools, except in subject matter. Students at the Academy were assessed on culture, etiquette, and magic. Apparently, only culture and etiquette had been relevant in the past, but the introduction of the meritocratic system necessitated the inclusion of magic. At least, that was what I'd read in *Revolution*'s character guide.

The world of *Revolution* was in the process of, well, revolution. The catalyst had been the discovery of a special kind of stone, which had prompted the invention of magical tools and led to technical innovation. The magical tools were changing the world, and countries were competing to use them most effectively.

Speaking of which—the child version of Claire described in the character guide was a little angel. As I basked in that fond memory, though, Claire suddenly grabbed my chin and lifted it.

"The test will decide things, once and for all. If I win, you will leave the school."

"What? No, I don't want that."

“Oh no?” Claire’s voice got sharper, but for once, it didn’t excite me. “Is the top-scoring new student a coward, then?”

“But if I leave the Academy, I won’t be able to play with you any longer, Miss Claire.”

“Would you seriously stop saying such things?”

“Ha ha ha. You’re so silly.”

“*I’m* the one who is silly?! Me?!”

However, as I indulged in my teasing, I remembered this was one of the events of the game. In fact, Claire presented the heroine with a variety of challenges through the entire course of *Revolution*, the first of which was beating her in the start-of-term tests.

“How about this?” I said. “If you can’t beat me, then you must grant me a favor.”

“Wh-what? Why in the world…?”

“Hmm? Are *you* the coward, then? I thought you were at the top of the class of continuing students.”

The Royal Academy encompassed kindergarten, elementary, junior high, high school, and university, and its students fell into two groups: those who had enrolled in kindergarten and continued on, and those who transferred in later. The player character was the best of the incoming transfer students, and Claire was the best of the students who had attended from the first. The continuing students were mainly aristocrats while the transfer students were mainly commoners, and the two groups generally didn’t get along. It was considered quite the tragedy when a noble student had to share a dorm room with a commoner.

“So you accept my challenge?” Claire demanded. “Very well. I accept your terms.”

“Heh heh. Thank you.”

“What do you imagine you’re thanking me for? You may as well pack your bags now.”

“Yes! Thank you for the encouragement!”

“I most certainly am not—ugh! Misha!”

“What is it?” Misha had been watching us from the sidelines, but she came over when Claire called her.

“Will you be our witness? If I achieve the higher score on this test, this commoner will leave the Academy. If, for some reason, I can’t beat her, I will grant her a single favor.”

“Expulsion and enrollment within the institute are decided by the King, you know. I don’t think such a condition can be enforced.”

“There will be no need to enforce it. The commoner will leave the school of her own accord, shamed by her lack of talent.” Claire let out her shrill laugh, as if she had already won.

“Are you really okay with this, Rae?”

“Yes.”

“Then it’s decided. We can’t have her going back on your promise, so you will be the witness, Misha. That’s fine with you, isn’t it, commoner?”

“Yes! Just thinking about doing something for Miss Claire makes me so excited!”

“I will not lose! Now, swear to God!”

“Swear to God!”

“And I am witness to your accord…”

In this world, swearing to God was deeply significant. Breaking such a vow was nigh unthinkable for both aristocrats and commoners.

That was just how Claire and I finally broke the ice.

The day of the test had come.

The first subject was culture, which covered the history and literature of the Bauer Kingdom. For example:

Question:

Discuss the flaws of the policies of King Cooley III and how they were remedied during Bauer's Great Famine of 1827.

Or,

Question:

Identify and discuss problems and potential solutions for one major industry of the kingdom.

Or,

Question:

Compose a poem using classical meter.

As you can see, the questions weren't particularly relevant to daily life. In a world where relatively few commoners were literate, nobility like Claire possessed an overwhelming advantage when it came to the subject of culture. And since there were only two other tests, this also gave her an advantage when it came to our overall scores, which were combined from those three tests.

"That was hard…" I murmured.

Revolution allowed the player to gather information through actions like studying before they took the test. Though the questions were posed in essay format, the game itself presented you with multiple choice answers, so you just had to pick the right one. Most players tended to look up walkthroughs for the answer keys, which was still time-consuming, given the sheer number of questions.

The next test was on etiquette, conducted in the form of a formal meal. The exam began before students even entered the banquet room that served as its venue, with the examiner scoring them on things like their dress, their posture, the way they greeted others in the room, and even where their eyes lingered while they ate. It went far beyond such things as how to handle which of the twenty or so pieces of cutlery. Of course, Claire, as an aristocrat, had an overwhelming advantage here as well.

In the game, this test was also multiple choice. For example, you could choose whether you wore black or white clothes, or what greeting to give when entering the room, where to rest your gaze, etc. Most players looked up the answers for this online, too.

"It's actually pretty tricky when you have to do it yourself," I mused.

The last test assessed our magical ability, and it was the only one where commoners really had a shot at beating nobility. In fact, the king's new merit-based policy could more accurately be called a magical power-based policy. An individual's aptitude for using high-tech magic tools was innate and unrelated to their social status. The king feared Bauer would be left behind by the changing times if he continuing catering solely to the nobles' wishes; the aristocrats, nevertheless, chafed at his supposed system of meritocracy because magical power had nothing to do with family or lineage.

The magic test took place outdoors. There were two assessments, one for basic magical power and another for wielding magical tools. Basic magical power was measured by a device, and it came in four kinds of aptitudes: earth, water, fire, and wind. A person generally possessed one aptitude, which was rated on a five-point scale: none, low, medium, high, and super. While magical ability could be improved through training, it was fundamentally an immutable inborn quality.

Claire had a high aptitude for fire, which really did suit her. The interests of the game developers were sometimes

obvious.

The test of magical tool operation required wielding a wand, a general-purpose tool that could be used to create various phenomena. This test would be to see how far we could make a magic bullet fly.

“Well, that was easy enough.”

In the game, magical power could be increased through the “magic training” action, and in the test, the bullet’s flight distance was determined by a rhythm game. It was by far the simplest test and only required good timing, so there was no need to look up answers or anything. However, some players insisted on comparing their bullet flight scores, and *Revolution* had rankings on its website. First place scored some free gifts from the game developers, but anyone who went that far cared more about the record itself than prizes. My last personal best was tens of times higher than the average.

At any rate, those were the exams. After spending all day in testing, I was exhausted.

“And so, I’m here to reenergize!”

“Would you please go home?”

Claire shooed me off when I showed up at her room, looking tired herself. Aww.

***

The results were posted three days after the exam.

“You have dark circles under your eyes, did you know?” Claire approached me in the hall after class, where I was waiting in front of the bulletin board for the results.

“Yes, well, I actually didn’t sleep a wink…”

“Oh ho ho ho. How very unfortunate. But a promise is a promise now, isn’t it?”

“Yes. I just couldn’t stop daydreaming about what favor I should ask of you, and before I knew it, it was morning.”

“That’s what you meant?!”

Of course. I wouldn’t have been able to make any such requests of Claire in the real game—this was unbearably exciting.

“Do you really think you can beat me? You are so oblivious,” Claire was bursting with confidence, which made sense from her point of view.

“Well, we won’t know how it went until we see the results, will we?”

“It’s perfectly obvious.”

“Heh heh. You two certainly have become close,” said Yu, butting his way into our conversation. “How confident are you, Rae?”

“Well, a bit.”

“Heh. I’m looking forward to it. How about you, Misha?”

“I did my best,” Misha didn’t look particularly happy to be talking to the boy she was crushing on. She was convinced she wasn’t worthy of Yu, that ever since her house had fallen into ruin, she had nothing to offer someone as talented as he was.

Still, the most infuriating thing about love is that it can’t be stopped.

“All right then, who will be number two?” And there was Rod, implying, of course, that there was no doubt in his mind he had the top marks. He was so good at finding ways to rekindle my disdain.

Silence followed.

Far from Claire, who was first in line waiting for the results, and myself, who was standing next to her, stood Thane with a blank expression on his face. He probably wasn’t looking forward to being forced to face his own inadequacies.

Don’t get me wrong, though—Thane only seemed inferior in comparison to his brothers. He was a completely capable person in his own right.

“It’s here,” Misha’s voice brought me back to reality. The office clerk was headed in our direction with a piece of paper.

“Are you ready?” Claire asked smugly.

“I am very ready to enjoy you, Miss Claire.”

The first score sheet to be posted listed the results of the culture test.

Culture Subject Results

1st Rod Bauer (100 pts)

2nd Yu Bauer (98 pts)

2nd Rae Taylor (98 pts)

4th Claire François (95 pts)

…

…

7th Misha Jur (90 pts)

…

…

10th Thane Bauer (87 pts)

…

…

“Wha?!” Claire exclaimed. Personally, I was disappointed that I’d missed two questions.

“Well! I expected myself and Yu to finish first and second, of course, but way to go, Rae,” said Rod.

“Great job, Rae.”

“Thank you very much.” I glanced at Claire while the two princes praised me. She seemed baffled that she, an aristocrat, could have scored lower than a commoner.

As I said before, most players looked up answers online. Not me, though. *I’d* gone out of my way to memorize every single one of the questions and answers on the culture exam. The reason was simple: I wrote *Revolution* fanfiction.

Short fanfiction can be composed without a complete grasp of the story’s world and perspective. However, I wrote fanfiction about Claire after she lost the game and truly became a villainess, charting her rise to power. To properly imagine how the game world would change in years to come, I bought the character reference guide and immersed myself in it. To be honest, I was confident I knew the world better than the game’s developers at this point.

All of which was to say that I wasn’t the least bit surprised by these results. Claire, meanwhile, was clenching her fists so tightly that her knuckles had turned white, trembling with rage.

Next, the results of the etiquette test were posted.

Etiquette Subject Results

1st Yu Bauer (100 pts)

2nd Rod Bauer (98 pts)

3rd Claire François (97 pts)

4th Thane Bauer (95 pts)

…

…

8th Misha Jur (90 pts)

…

…

22nd Rae Taylor (75 pts)

…

…

Color returned to Claire's face after the shock of the culture results. She sneered at me with a triumphant expression. Augh, she was transcendently cute. *Really*.

"So, the first one was just a fluke. The wolf has been stripped of her sheepskin."

"Yes, you're right."

Exactly right, in fact. I knew every criterion that would be evaluated in the etiquette test, but knowing them and implementing them in real time were two separate things. In high school, back in my world, I'd been a member of the Japanese Kimono Club. But etiquette differs from culture to culture, situation to situation, and I couldn't hope to master Bauer's rules in the short time I'd had so far in this world. There was no way I could compete with Claire, born and raised as an aristocrat. I actually felt like twenty-second place was pretty good for me.

Finally, the results of the magical power test went up.

Magical Power Subject Results

1st Rae Taylor (Immeasurable)

2nd Misha Jur (98 pts)

…

…

6th Claire François (92 pts)

…

8th Thane Bauer (90 pts)

9th Rod Bauer (88 pts)

9th Yu Bauer (88 pts)

“Wh-what is this…?” Claire was flustered again. I, of course, was elated.

In truth, the outcome of this test had been set in stone. As the heroine of the game, I was scripted to have aptitude in both earth and water. While having multiple aptitudes was already special, both of mine were at the “super” rank. As magical tool-wielding efficacy was proportional to the wielder’s innate magical power, the player character inevitably placed first in this exam.

Finally, the overall scores were pinned.

Comprehensive results

1st Rod Bauer (286 pts)

1st Yu Bauer (286 pts)

3rd Claire François (284 pts)

…

…

8th Misha Jur (278 pts)

…

…

10th Thane Bauer (272 pts)

…

…

**Note, due to the unprecedented results attained by Rae Taylor, her score will be handled separately at this point in time. The Academy will review its methods of evaluation going forward.*

There it was.

“I don’t get it…” Claire bit her lip, and her minions rushed to reassure her.

“But you’re second after the two princes! That’s amazing!”

“That’s right! We knew you could do it, Miss Claire!”

“Yes… Yes, that’s right.” Claire looked like she was starting to feel a little better, when—

“Misssss Claaaaaire!” Of course, I dashed over to her as well.

“Huh?!”

“How cruel! You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I do *not*. What do you want? As you can see, our competition has been voided.”

“What are you saying? Miss Claire, you were unable to beat me.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t you remember your vow? If you beat me, I would leave the Academy. If you didn’t beat me, you would grant me a favor.”

“I am aware—and we were unable to come to a conclusion.”

“Right. So you didn’t beat me, Miss Claire.”

“Ah…”

Now she got it. The condition I’d set for my favor wasn’t “beat Claire,” it was “Claire *doesn’t* beat me.” As such, logically speaking, this included scenarios where the results were inconclusive.

“H-how cowardly!”

“Yes, I left the wording ambiguous to trick you!”

“Then it doesn’t count!”

“What? You’d break your vow? But you swore to God.”

“Err…” Claire’s beautiful face was conflicted. Hook, line, and sinker. “Well then… What is your request?”

“I knew you would come through, Miss Claire! I love you!”

“That’s enough. Just hurry up and tell me!” Claire was on the verge of losing her temper.

I clasped my hands in front of me and looked her directly in the eyes. “Please don’t give up.”

“Huh?”

“No matter how hard things get: don’t give up until the very end.”

Claire wore a puzzled look as she listened to my words. Silly as they sounded, there was a purpose to my request.

“And that’s all?”

“Yes?”

“I thought you would ask me for something completely unreasonable.”

“Would you prefer that?”

“No. This is fine.” Perfectly straightforward. Claire, whose shoulders had begun to slump, stood straight once more when her eyes met mine. “I swear to God that I will not give up. I promise never to abandon hope and to keep going until the end.”

“That’s wondrous, Miss Claire.” What a beautiful thing it is to make such an oath. This was exactly the response I’d hoped for.

“I won’t lose the next one.” With those words, Claire turned to leave. Truly, I thought, a graceful exit for an exquisite villainess.

“Oh, Miss Claire.”

“What is it now?”

“I love you.”

“Well, I hate you!”

And just when it felt like things between us were going so well…

Still, this was perfect. After all, this was exactly how my Claire ought to be.

***

Revolution was a dating sim. As I said before, I only cared about the male love interests insofar as they let me spend time with Claire. The romance that brought you into the most contact with Claire was the one with Thane, the second-born prince, and I was more than willing to take that route if need be—but there was a problem.

"Hey, Rae. Are you listening?" a clear baritone addressed me.

"I'm sorry… I was distracted."

"You're so funny. That's all right; I forgive you." Rod laughed, and the noble-born girls around us looked on with envy. No matter how rich their families might be, it seemed they didn't have the courage to approach the first-born prince.

One of the early triggers for Rod's romance route was achieving excellent results in the start-of-term tests. Checking that box got Rod's attention and made him begin to flirt with you. That's what was happening at the moment, and like I said, it was a problem.

When I turned to look behind me, I found Thane in the last row of the classroom looking bored out of his mind.

I did this to beat Claire, but…

If your test results were too good, Thane's interest in you decreased. He was a tangle of inferiority complexes and not fond of people more skilled than himself. What an endearing character flaw.

"Master Rod, should you speak so casually to such a peasant? She will sully your noble blood."

“Oh, Miss Claire!”

I brightened at the familiar pointed tone. Unlike the young women in her entourage, Claire never hesitated to approach Rod. That was natural enough, given her family’s status, but I thought it had more to do with Claire’s personality.

“She may be a commoner, but she has skills. And her reactions are interesting, too.”

“That teasing of yours is a bad habit, Rod. Rae, you don’t have to indulge him.” Yu joined us at that point. The exam results didn’t affect his route, so his behavior toward me hadn’t changed.

“I think Rae could suffer to show a little more respect for royalty,” said Misha, who was quietly studying in the next seat over. Misha was always by the heroine’s side, giving her advice. Of course, this also led to mayhem on the Yu route.

“I respect the royal family,” I said, “but my love for Claire runs far deeper than any respect.”

“What do you think about that, Claire?”

“I have no interest in the thoughts of peasants. …I do think she’s taking this a bit too far, though.”

“Yes! Please cut me down to size!”

“Why does that make you so happy?!”

Seeing Claire and I up to our usual antics made Rod laugh again. “Ha ha! You really are funny!”

Oof. This was starting to be a problem. I didn’t know what to do.

“Master Rod,” I said, my diction clear as possible.

“What is it?”

“I’m only interested in Miss Claire.”

“It sure does seem that way.”

“So, if you could please leave me be…”

“Hey, Rae!” Misha sounded flustered. She probably thought I was being too frank—that was the point! “Rod, I’m so sorry. Rae hasn’t learned how to comport herself around royalty yet.”

“Oh no, I don’t think so. Do you really think we should ignore what she just said?” Claire interjected. It was just like Misha to bandage my self-inflicted wounds and just like Claire to pour salt into them. “Ignorance is no excuse. Does she think she suddenly has status just because she did well on a test?”

“Well,” Rod mused. “Claire does have a point, but…”

“Don’t I? I beg of you to make sure her punishment is severe.”

“But this is the Academy. Here, I am merely a student. And above all else…”

“But to simply disregard what she—”

“Above all else,” Rod repeated. “I choose to forgive. This is the word of your future king. Do you disagree?”

He really did sound like a king when he spoke like that.

“Er! Understood.” Claire backed off, clearly frustrated.

“Miss Claire,” I said.

“Hmph… What is it? You must be proud of yourself for gaining Master Rod’s favor.”

“Not really.”

“Hmm?”

“You were just trying to be proper, Miss Claire. I respect you for that.”

Once again, Claire looked like a pigeon that had been nailed by a BB gun. I was sure she’d never imagined a person she was criticizing would back her up.

“Well—hmph! I still don’t like you! I will never accept you!”

“Yes! I’ll work my hardest to change your mind.”

“I’m saying it will never happen!”

“I will do my best to make it happen!”

“You two are quite a pair.”

“Yes!”

“No, we are not!”

Claire really was the cutest.

***

Even though I was attending the Academy on a scholarship and exempt from tuition, there were other costs that came with attendance. Since my character’s family was poor, the only way I could cover those expenses was to get a part-time job. Classes were generally held in the mornings, so I could work in the afternoons. The main character’s status changed depending on the job she took up, making the decision an important element of the game.

“Your application is rejected.”

“Please, isn’t there any way?”

“I told you already, you’re rejected!”

I was at the François family home, interviewing for the position of maid. The Academy allowed students, formerly only rich kids, to bring two maids to school with them. This was irrelevant to scholarship students, who didn’t have the funds to hire help, but it certainly wasn’t irrelevant to me. Becoming Claire’s maid would give me an excellent reason to always be by her side.

The senior maid normally decided whether to hire new staff, but Claire was attending my interview, too. After all, I’d told her of my application in advance.

“Miss Claire, are you sure we can’t hire her?” the senior maid said hesitantly. “She has such exceptional skills…”

While I wasn’t quite at the aristocrat level, I was much better versed in etiquette than the average commoner, which

was an important trait for a maid. I could also work magic, meaning I could protect myself.

"The problem is her personality! I would never have a moment's rest if I had to be around a maid like this all day."

"But it seems she's very loyal."

"It's not just loyalty, Madam. I am in love."

"And I simply can't have a maid who talks to me like that!" Claire squawked.

"What in the world is going on? What is this racket?"

"Master…"

"Father."

The man who entered the room had the same bright blond hair as Claire, but his was combed back. He was of medium stature, with no memorable features other than his aristocratic mustache, but the way he carried himself made it clear he was of noble birth.

This was Dole François, Claire's father and head of House François. Dole was the Bauer Kingdom's Minister of Finance, which made him the third-most powerful person in the kingdom and also the most influential aristocrat. He'd been one of the first to oppose meritocratic policy, and it wasn't an exaggeration to call him a thorn in the king's side. In the game, for better or worse, he behaved with a noble's courtesy, esteemed tradition and formality above all else.

"We are hiring a maid to accompany Miss Claire at the Academy, but the Lady disagrees with my selection."

"I see. Well, our senior maid would only select a candidate of high capability, so what is the issue, Claire?"

"Her personality is impossible. She is always attempting to make a fool of me…"

"Aha… So the issue isn't a lack of qualifications but a lack of respect for her employer?"

As a side note, Dole adored Claire. He was undoubtedly a large part of why she had such a spoiled personality.

“I wouldn’t say that’s the case,” the senior maid said. “She applied for the position because she wants to serve the Lady Claire. Unlike most interviewees, she seems to have no financial motivation.”

“Well, she might just be saying that.”

“When I asked her how she would serve the Lady if she were hired as a maid, her answer was exceedingly well thought out and specific. I don’t believe it’s just lip service.”

Dole hemmed and hawed a bit, deep in thought. “But Claire is unfond of her. And if Claire dislikes her, I do not see how you can hire her.”

“That is true, but—”

“Exactly, Father!”

“Your Excellency! Please forgive me for my disrespect.” Sensing the tables turning against me, I played my trump card. Dole frowned at my outburst.

“You, a commoner, utter these words to a noble? And the Minister of Finance, no less? It seems Claire was correct in her judgment. One can only tolerate so much impudence.”

“Irvine Manuel.”

The instant I said this name, the color drained from Dole’s face. There was a hint of a smile on his lips, but his eyes were cold as stone.

“And who might that be?” he said.

“March 3rd, five hundred thousand gold,” I said.

“Father?”

“Claire, senior maid, please leave us.”

“But we must not! At least let me call for a guard—”

“That is an order.”

“Must I leave, too?”

“I’m sorry, Claire. I just want to confirm a few things. Please go,” Dole said to Claire in a soft voice.

“Fine…” Claire begrudgingly left the room.

“Now, then. Who are you and what do you know?”

Unlike when he spoke to Claire, Dole’s tone as he questioned me was harsh and cold. Depending on my answer, there was a possibility I wouldn’t leave the mansion alive. But my life had a very important purpose: I intended to live to love Claire. I wasn’t going to die.

I spoke with Dole for thirty minutes straight.

“You will hire this person as Claire’s maid.”

These were the first words out of Dole’s mouth after we were done talking and he called the senior maid and Claire back into the room.

“Why?!”

“We can trust her. She will be suitable as Claire’s maid.”

“I don’t accept this! What did you say to my father?!”

“Nothing special. I mean, I told him about my love for you, Miss Claire.”

“Would you stop joking around?!” Claire was even more upset than usual, and why wouldn’t she be? Her father, who had been her staunchest supporter only minutes before, had suddenly switched teams. “Father, do you mean that someone who speaks to me like this is to attend me?!”

“Having spoken to her, I am convinced of her earnestness. She is completely loyal to you, Claire.”

“But her loyalty is impure! She wants to make a fool of me!”

“Claire.” Dole dropped his voice a bit. When a crafty politician like him did that, it had an impact. “It’s easy to have an obedient person serve at your side. But as the eldest daughter of the François family, it will be up to you to take the reins someday.”

“Ugh…” Claire didn’t have a leg to stand on once he’d invoked her position as the eldest daughter. Her father knew exactly how to handle her. “So, you insist that we hire her?”

“That is correct.”

“Fine…” Claire was clearly dissatisfied, but she held her chin high and said, “As my maid, you must do as I say. Be prepared!”

“Thank you so much! I will do my best!”

And that was how I landed the job of Claire’s maid. Just don’t expect me to tell you what I said to Dole—that stays secret.

***

“Good morning, Miss Claire.”

When I entered Claire’s room to help her get dressed the next morning, she looked back at me with an uncertain expression. It was perfect.

“So you really have become my maid, then…” she said.

“Indeed. I promise to take very good care of you.”

“Don’t you mean, ‘Please take care of me’?”

“Huh? But I’m the maid, so I’ll be the one providing the care, right?”

“That’s not what I mean!”

“Yes. I was just kidding.”

“Argh!”

Claire was in good health, hooray!

“Rae, don’t trouble Miss Claire so much. Here, Miss Claire. I brought your clothes.” The quiet voice advising me was Claire’s other maid, Lene Aurousseau. She was a little older than us, had fluffy, flaxen hair, and seemed very patient.

“Good morning, Lene. Please dress me.”

“Oh, please let me do it!”

“Would you get away from me?!”

“My, you certainly are dedicated to your job.”

Lene grinned at my obvious ulterior motives while Claire shrieked. Lene was a commoner like me, but she was also the eldest daughter of one of the kingdom’s few wealthy merchant families, the Aurousseaus of the Aurousseau Commercial Firm. Her family lacked for nothing, and she was only serving as Claire’s maid to secure connections with Claire’s father, Dole, the Minister of Finance.

“Let’s use this opportunity to have Rae dress you,” she said.

“No! This peasant will do everything wrong!”

“Come now. There may come a time when I’m ill and can’t properly perform my duties. Shouldn’t Rae learn what to do in such an event?”

“Well… Perhaps that’s true…”

As was clear from this conversation, Lene liked Claire and was adept at managing her. Though she seemed meek and subservient, in reality, she had Claire eating out of the palm of her hand.

“Rae, you must also keep a rein on your teasing of Miss Claire. Even with all that overflowing love of yours.”

“Understood.”

“Lene!”

“Tee hee. Just a joke, Miss.” The way Lene laughed, it would have been easy to mistake her as Claire’s sister or some other close relation. They had known each other for a long time; Lene had worked as Claire’s maid ever since Claire could remember. The position of the second maid had a high turnover rate, due to Claire’s fierce personality, but Lene had remained in her service all along. This wasn’t mentioned during gameplay, but it was described in detail in the character reference guide.

“Now, let’s get dressed. Rae, would you please remove Miss Claire’s clothes?”

“Yes. Excuse me, Miss Claire.”

Claire trusted herself to my care in silence, perhaps with resignation. Everything she wore was custom-made and opulent, and of course, her pajamas were no exception. They were made of smooth silk, a rare sight in this kingdom where hemp and cotton were the norm.

Although, it wasn't just her pajamas I was admiring. Up close and personal, Claire was incredibly lovely. Her skin was like fine porcelain, and while she wasn't very tall, she had long, slender arms and legs, and curves in all the right places. She was flawless.

"Would you stop gawking?"

"Please excuse me. You're just so beautiful, Miss Claire."

"I'm really tired of your compliments. Aren't you done yet?"

"I would really like to admire you a bit longer, but—"

"Hurry up with it!"

I collected myself and dressed Claire in her school uniform. The Royal Academy uniform was similar to the blazers found in modern Japan, but the design was exceptionally elegant. Most schools didn't have uniforms in this world, since commoners often couldn't afford to attend in the first place and nobles enjoyed dressing up. The Royal Academy used uniforms as a way to mark status. Only the chosen elite had the privilege of passing their arms through these sleeves. Unlike Japanese uniforms, which were designed for homogeneity, the Academy's uniforms were a symbol of excellence and prestige.

Claire pushed her arms through the embroidered, frilly white blouse.

"Rae won't be able to do your hair yet. I'll manage it today," Lene said.

Claire's trademark golden curls weren't natural. I was already practicing how to craft them on a wig, but hadn't yet mastered the necessary technique, so it was up to Lene to skillfully style Claire's hair.

Incidentally, there was no shampoo or conditioner in this world. People used soap to wash their hair, but it was made differently from the kind in my world and could get hair just as clean as the products I was more familiar with. I'd read a lot of stories of people transported to other worlds setting up shop to sell homemade shampoo and conditioner, but that wasn't my cup of tea.

"You are so very skilled, Lene. It looks wonderful." Claire gazed at the mirror, satisfied that she looked like a perfect young noble lady from every angle. She scored a critical hit on my heart, for sure.

"Don't waste such compliments on me."

"Well then, let's go to the cafeteria."

Academy meals were served in the cafeteria, and, of course, were extravagant. They weren't presented in multiple courses, but each meal had a staple, a main dish, side dish, soup, and dessert. These wonderful meals were one of the

things the commoner scholarship students most looked forward.

"Hmph… Look at these scraps."

However, the meals fell far short of the standards of a purebred noble like Claire.

"Really? But it's so delicious," I was enjoying the heck out of my beef bowl. Claire would never deign to eat such an abomination.

"Perhaps to a commoner. They could at least serve something from Broumet."

Broumet was the hottest restaurant in the kingdom's capital. It specialized in developing new recipes and was frequented by nobles. It was also painfully expensive. A single Broumet course could cost half a commoner's yearly salary. The Academy might have been established by royalty and have plenty of funds, but such extravagance would eat into even their deep pockets.

"Miss Claire, you mustn't be picky," Lene scolded, seeing Claire nudge the green peppers out of her food.

"Green peppers are not meant to be consumed by humans. Don't let it concern you. There are more appropriate vegetables to sustain me."

"That isn't the point. These meals are paid for by the people's taxes. As an aristocrat, you have an obligation to eat the food before you, Miss Claire."

"Ugh…" Claire had no comeback once her duty as an aristocrat came into question. One more nudge, and she would cave.

"Well then, can I eat them?" I said quickly. "It'll be like an indirect ki—"

"Bon appetit!" Before I could finish my sentence, Claire angrily shoveled all of the green peppers into her mouth. Hmph.

"Wonderful, Rae. You got Miss Claire to eat her peppers."

Once we were done eating, it was time for class. The first lecture of the day was in culture; since I had the character reference guide memorized cover to cover, this was pretty boring for me.

"Now, regarding the impact of King Cooley III's policies on international affairs… Miss Claire, what do you think?" Despite the fact that a teacher was addressing a student, Claire was 'Miss,' as she was with all the faculty. There were some nobility among our teachers, but none of superior standing to House François.

"King Cooley III's agricultural policy quickly resolved the famine afflicting the Alpecian region of our neighboring country. The incident brought to light vulnerabilities in Bauer's infrastructure, so the king subsequently invested a great deal in the development of the farm belt in the western region so as to improve self-sufficiency and reduce reliance on imports."

"That is exactly right."

Claire was an exemplary student. She had been provided with the best tutors ever since she was a child, but more than that, she always wanted to be the best, so she studied hard. Ever since losing to me in the culture exam, she'd spent even more time with her nose in books. Part of my job, as directed by the François family, included the role of Claire's at-home tutor, but at this point there wasn't anything I could teach her.

Lene didn't attend class with us. She was only at the Academy to accompany Claire, not as a student. There was a facility for servants next to the Academy student dormitory, and Lene stayed there, making her way to Claire's location whenever necessary. The maids had plenty of work to do while their employers were in class, such as washing clothes, reporting to parents, or preparing for the winter social events. As I was both a maid and a student at the Academy, I was to leave those tasks to Lene and assist Claire within the Academy.

“I want to hurry up and learn how to do every little thing for Miss Claire. I want to help her as much as I can.”

“You know that as long as you keep saying things like that, I’m not going to let you do anything for me, right?”

The morning classes had ended, leaving us free to spend the afternoon as we pleased. Compared to schools in Japan, the schedule was nearly idle. There were no nasty obligations like homework; those who wanted to study did so, and those who didn’t study spent their time on other pursuits. Generally speaking, the noble kids mostly socialized after class while the commoner students turned to their books.

While I was a transfer student, I was now Claire’s maid and was obligated to follow her wherever she went. Claire loved to socialize and was always surrounded by people. Though she had a strong personality, she could turn on the charm as she needed.

“Miss Claire, did you hear Broumet has a new dessert?”

“Of course. I’ve tried it, too. It was exactly what you would expect from Broumet. It is called *chocolate*; it has a wonderful aroma and a delicate bitterness within the sweet.”

“Oh! What a subtle palate. I would expect nothing less from you, Miss Claire.”

“I brought some to the Academy, so if you’d like to try it, you may come by my room later.”

It seemed the topic on the young ladies’ minds today was dessert. Sugar was still a luxury item in this world, making sweets delicacies only nobles could afford.

“You must think you’re so lucky,” one of Claire’s minions smiled thinly at me. “Now that you’re always with Claire, you get all the handouts you want, don’t you?”

“Oh ho ho ho.” Claire laughed her shrill laugh. “Don’t be silly, Pepi. This is just a maid. There’s no need to give her special treatment.”

“Even if she doesn’t give me sweets, getting to see her take off her blouse fills me more than three rice bowls!” I

declared.

"How dare you!"

Incidentally, the staple carbohydrate in the Bauer kingdom was bread, and rice was somewhat of a luxury item.

"Miss Claire… It's not really my place, but are you sure you want someone like this to always be by your side?" one of her minions said worriedly.

"There's nothing I can do… I said I didn't want her, but my father insisted that I should tame her," Claire complained, looking to her entourage for sympathy. Well, she wasn't mistaken.

"I understand how you feel," I said.

"I'm talking about you!"

"Rae, you really do like Miss Claire, don't you?" Now that the lecture was over, Lene had joined us, laughing cheerfully. She had prepared tea for the young ladies and expertly poured for each.

"No. I don't like her, not at all."

"Huh?" Not only Lene, but Claire's entire entourage—including Claire herself—looked surprised.

"Oh? Miss Claire, do you look sad? You do, right? Are you flirting? Is it finally flirting time now?"

"No! What in the world is flirting time?"

Really? I could have sworn she'd looked sad for a moment. "I don't 'like' Miss Claire," I explained. "I adore her. Actually, I love her."

"Er…"

"Oh my."

"Peasant."

"My name is Rae, Miss Claire."

"I will consider calling you by your name if you listen to what I'm about to say," Claire said with a chuckle.

“Oh! Yes, then what is it?”

“Stop uttering this nonsense about liking or loving me.”

“Ah, then no.”

“Maybe you should take your time with that answer? You’ve only just met me.”

“Oh. Well, I suppose it does seem that way from your perspective, Miss Claire.”

“Do you have a different perspective?”

“I know everything about you.” After all, I had played the entire game, read the character reference guide cover to cover, and even read all the related secondary material.

Claire shook her head, bewildered by my claim. “It’s amazing how you keep going, with the way I treat you…”

“Oh, so you do notice it?”

“Would you just shut up?!”

“But that’s what I love about you, Miss Claire. Please take me to task.”

“You really have no idea what you’re doing, do you?”

That wasn’t true. I knew exactly what I was doing—doting on Claire.

Once the socializing died down in the evening, we went back to the dorms. Dinner was served in the cafeteria, just like breakfast and lunch.

“Ah, how perfect.”

“Who are you talking to?”

Claire had put her hair up, and her voice echoed off the walls. We were surrounded by steam, so I couldn’t clearly see her exquisitely proportioned body.

Obviously, we were in the bath. Heating that much water was no easy task, making baths a rare thing even in noble households, but the Academy dormitory had a large

heated bath enabled by the volcanic vents near the capital. In other words, this wasn't just a normal bath—it was a hot spring.

"Isn't this indulgent?" I sighed.

"Tee hee, yes, it is. It's far beyond what a simple peasant could even imagine."

"Miss Claire, Rae, aren't you cold?" Lene approached us from the washing area.

Claire sneezed, "Yes, we are. Hurry and wash me so I can get into the bath, Lene."

"Yes, Miss." Lene lathered up a sponge with soap and ran it over Claire's back. "Rae, will you wash her hair, please?"

"Any funny business and I'll slap you," Claire sniffed.

Claire didn't trust me at all. I took the soap in my hand and lathered it up. As I noted before, the soap here was made differently from my world's; it had a wonderful fragrance and produced the fluffiest suds.

"Pardon me, Miss Claire."

I started to carefully wash the golden threads of Claire's hair. I also gently massaged her scalp, and she seemed to like that quite a bit.

"Oh… That's very good," Claire seemed surprised. "Have you done this before?"

"Well, yes."

The heroine of *Revolution* was an only child, but in my previous life on Earth, I'd had a younger brother whom I often bathed. Only amateurs use shampoo hats! Once you got the hang of it, you could wash hair without so much as a speck of shampoo dripping into the person's eyes. It also helped that the soap in this world was so finely crafted.

"I'm going to rinse it out now." I made sure Claire had her eyes closed and poured the hot water over her head. The

foam washed cleanly away, and our lady was clean as a whistle.

She really was beautiful. Sexual orientation aside, she was…breathtaking.

“It feels like you’re looking places you shouldn’t be…”

“It’s your imagination.” It wasn’t her imagination.

Once she was washed clean, Claire let out a deep sigh as she immersed herself in the bath water.

“Miss Claire, you sound like an old lady.”

“I-Ingrate! I just breathed out a little more than normal.”

“Yes, let’s say that was it, then.”

“Argh!”

“Settle down now, Miss Claire. Take some time to relax in your bath,” Lene soothed Claire after my teasing. It seemed this was becoming our routine.

Claire luxuriated in a longish soak. Once she got out and slipped into her pajamas, Lene returned to her own dormitory and Claire went to bed. Her roommate had the top bunk and she the bottom one.

You see, Claire was a bit afraid of heights.

“Good night, Miss Claire.”

“Yes, yes.”

“Do you perhaps need a good-night kiss?”

“Do you think I would let these lips touch a maid’s?!”

“I suppose not, I just thought I’d offer.”

“I really don’t understand peasants… Go to sleep.”

“Of course, good night.”

I always waited till I was sure Claire had fallen asleep before returning to my own room. There was silence for about five minutes, and then she spoke.

“Are you still there?”

“Yes, Miss Claire.”

“I see… Why do you say you like me?”

“Hmm? Because you’re so cute, of course.”

“So you like how I look?”

“Not just that. I love your personality, too.”

I gave that answer without thinking, and Claire fell silent. While I was trying to decide what to say next, breath caught in my throat, she spoke again.

“Contrary to appearances, I know myself.” She sounded half-asleep. “My personality isn’t one that earns affection.”

“That’s not—”

“There’s no need for empty compliments. I want to know what it is you’re really after.” Her voice was serious. She was truly convinced no one liked her for herself.

“Miss Claire, I intend to remain by your side because I truly like you. I have no other motives.”

“So, you’re going to play innocent to the very end…”

I didn’t care for the despair in her voice. “You don’t believe me?”

“No.”

“Then I will do my best to make you.”

Silence again.

A few more minutes passed with no response from Claire. I started to leave the room, thinking that at last she was asleep.

“Do whatever you want…” Her voice, echoing in the darkness as I left the room, sounded profoundly lonely.

***

The next afternoon, a group of noble-born boys were getting rowdy in the Academy lobby. At the center of the commotion was Rod Bauer. As I mentioned before, the oldest prince was, in a word, narcissistic. He was blunt, focused, and always single-mindedly moving forward. Definitely not my type.

He surrounded himself with similar people, too. Commoners and aristocrats didn't cross paths much, but many shared the goal of establishing whatever connections they could with the most influential nobles. However, unlike Yu, who was often followed by a bevy of girls, Rod spent more time with boys. Apparently, he still found goofing off with his guy friends more fun than romantic pursuits.

"Oh look, it's Rae. Hey, come over here."

Of course, there were exceptions. He wanted the attention of people whom he found amusing, regardless of gender, and he was interested in me because of my test results.

"No, thank you. I need to attend to Miss Claire," I said.

"It's fine. You were lucky enough to have Master Rod call you by name, so go ahead," Claire said. Of course, what she really meant to say was that I should get away from her. Lene was also smiling, if wryly.

"No. I must remain by Miss Claire's side. See how loyal I am? Please reward me!"

"You can't just ask for a reward for yourself!" Yup, Claire was clearly playing along with my antics again.

"C'mon," Rod insisted. "Claire can come, too. We're playing chess."

"Master Rod is way too skilled. No one can beat him," said one of the noble boys with Rod.

They weren't hyping him up or anything, either—Rod really was a god of chess. He had been educated in the strategy and tactics of military command since he was young, and chess had been used to hammer those basics home.

“Claire, you’re pretty good, aren’t you? How about a game?”

“I must decline. I am no match for Master Rod.” Claire was competitive, but she knew Rod was a master who’d mop the floor with her.

“How about Rae, then?”

“I… Well, maybe just for a while.”

“Let’s play one game. I’m interested to see how it goes.”

“Fine, I suppose.”

And that was how I ended up sitting down for a round of chess with Rod.

There was silence.

“Check.”

“You… Peasant…” Claire said. It said volumes about her feelings that she would use such derogatory terms in front of Rod. The other noble kids hanging around us also seemed angry. I’d completely dominated the game so far, and Rod’s king had been in danger for some time now.

More silence.

Rod had lost his trademark composure and was staring intently at the board. How he handled his rook in his next move would determine the outcome of the game.

“Rae… You’re good.”

“Oh no, I’m all right, at best.”

“Don’t be modest. No one has given me this much trouble since Yu.”

“Do you surrender?” I asked.

“Hey! Watch what you say!” Claire cried.

“No, you really are good… But still not as good as me.”

Rod moved his rook between his king and my king, taking my queen, which had held his king in check.

“Checkmate.”

I’d seen it coming. Even if I were to take his rook with my bishop, that bishop would be taken by his knight, and my king would fall a few moves later, anyway. If I were to move my king away, he would follow me with the rook, trapping me against the edge of the board. It would only take a few moves to take the queen that I had traded a pawn in for. I was stuck.

“I lose,” I said.

“Whooo!” The spectators burst into cheers and jumps of excitement at this unexpected turnabout. Rod wore a smug grin.

“Man, it really was a close game,” I said.

Rod leaned toward me. “You figured out my strategy around the middle, didn’t you?”

“What? Did you notice?”

“I did. My victory was decided by the point my bishop took your rook.”

“Yeah, it was. That was a bit careless of me!”

A number of the noble kids were now focused on me.

“Rae, I can’t believe you hid this talent from us.”

“If you can hold your own against Master Rod, maybe you’re as good as Master Yu?”

“Play me next!”

“Hey, wait. That was intense. Let’s call it a day,” Rod said in a rare show of maturity. “Still, Rae, you really are skilled. Do commoners play chess, too?”

“Oh, no. I never played at home. I only knew the rules.”

“Wait, what?” Rod got a glassy look in his eyes.

It wasn’t an outright lie. The player character didn’t even have a chess board at home and had never had the opportunity to play. But as I mentioned earlier, my hobby in

my former life on Earth had been playing games, and I'd devoted a great deal of time to board games, including chess.

Also, I'd spent a *lot* of time playing the chess mini-game in *Revolution*, which had an AI opponent. There were several AI patterns in the game, starting with the weakest, assigned to Thane, and ending with the strongest, Hidden Yu. Each opponent had characteristic offensive and defensive tactics, and except for Hidden Yu, you could learn to win consistently if you played a lot.

So yes, I could actually have beaten Rod if I chose. But if I did that, he'd grow even more interested in me, so I let him win. My objective was, as ever, to dote on Claire, not to win a prince's heart.

As an aside, it was actually Yu who was best at chess, at least when he played seriously and turned into "Hidden Yu." In front of others, he submitted to Rod and was therefore considered second best, but when he played seriously, he was far better. Hidden Yu in the mini-game was so skilled that it was hard to believe it was in a dating sim.

"You can play that well when you've never played before?"

"No, I, uh, do have experience playing. Elsewhere. I forgot."

Silence.

"Come, Miss Claire. It's almost time to eat. Please excuse us, Rod," I said, attempting to leave.

"Let's play again one day. And next time, I want you to play seriously, got it?" he said with a smile. Agh, he'd figured out I was holding back.

"If we get the chance." I left the lobby, playing innocent.

"Peasant… Just who are you?" Claire asked me on the way to the cafeteria.

"Why, I am nothing but a slave to your love, Miss Claire."

“And there you are, trying to play me for the fool again. That’s fine. I’ll peel that sheep’s clothing off of you eventually, wolf.”

“I look forward to it.” I really wasn’t concealing any ulterior motives, but I wasn’t going to complain about piquing Claire’s interest. “Oh, yeah, how about that reward for my loyalty we were talking about?”

“There is none!”

***

Of the three brothers, the youngest, Yu, was the most princelike in a traditional sense. His mild personality and good looks made the noble girls flock to him, and he was quite the strategist. He would deliberately make mistakes to lull his opponents into carelessness and then bend them to his will. He was like Lene in that way.

Like Rod, Yu was also always surrounded by people. The difference was…

“Master Yu, I ordered some marvelous tea from the south. Please try some?”

“Goodness, this is rare. The Huchet family do business in the southern regions, don’t they? Thank you.”

“I brought some of the new Broumet sweets. They say it’s called chocolate.”

“Really? I’ll take one. Mmm… It’s delicious. The bitterness and enticing aroma are lovely. Thank you, Mil.”

“Oh yes, Master Yu. I—”

He was very popular with the girls.

“Check.”

“So it’s come to this.”

I was playing chess with Claire in the corner of a courtyard, far from Yu’s fanfare. It seemed my game with Rod

had sparked Claire's competitive side, and at this point, chess was the only thing I could actually teach her anything about. She currently had me cornered. If I made a mistake now, the tables would turn instantaneously.

"Then I'll go here."

Claire groaned as I moved my knight, and the situation rebalanced just the slightest bit in my favor. Claire's moves were easy to read. She pushed until she couldn't anymore, and that was it. Since I had studied her strategy extensively in the mini-game, it was easy for me to counter her. My current stats were seventeen wins and three losses. Not a bad win ratio.

But that wasn't the point. The fact that we had already played twenty games, less than a week after my game with Rod, was testament to Claire's competitive streak.

"Hmm… Claire, Q to F4."

"Huh…? Oh!"

Yu had shown up, breaking Claire's concentration. And what he'd said was brutal. This single move would break my defense and instantly shift the advantage to Claire.

"Thank you very much, Master Yu," Claire said. "But please don't interject in the middle of my game. I noticed that move on my own."

"Ah ha ha, sorry, sorry. I just know that Rae loves to bully you."

"Huh?" Claire had a blank look on her face.

"Rae is deliberately baiting you into attacking her and then guiding your pieces to places that are convenient for her. If you want to beat her, you'll have to change your strategy."

"Were you really doing such a mean thing, Rae?!"

"Yes, but…I've explained that many times in our post-game discussions."

No matter how many times I broke it down, Claire never switched up tactics, and her pieces inevitably fell into the exact traps I lured them into.

“Let’s all play poker for a change of pace.” Yu pulled out a deck of cards, a grin on his face. The nearby noble kids started to cluster around us, and I was pleased to see that Misha was part of the group, too. “Dede, would you deal?”

“Yes, sir.” The friend Yu appointed dealer had short black hair and a cool demeanor.

The rules were simple. Each person was allowed to draw twice, and whoever had the strongest hand at the end won the round. We weren’t wagering any money, so there were no rules like betting, raising, or calling to complicate things.

“Rae, my brother told me you were tremendously good at chess.”

“Well, I didn’t beat Master Rod.”

“I also heard you weren’t playing seriously.”

“Huh?!”

“Master Rod is just overestimating her.” Claire balked at Yu’s words. I resolved to feign complete ignorance. At least, that was my plan…

“Rae, were you going easy on Master Rod?” Misha demanded.

“Nuh-uh. Master Rod is imagining it. I played my best.”

“I certainly hope so. Master Rod loathes nothing more than people going easy on him in competition.”

“You really are interesting, Rae.” Yu laughed softly, which the noble girls around us clearly did not appreciate. They were so young… “Did you deal everyone in? Okay, let’s start drawing. You go first, Rae.”

I was dealt the two of clubs, four of clubs, three of hearts, ace of spades, and seven of spades. Not bad. I was just one away from a straight.

“I’ll draw one.” I discarded the seven of spades and the dealer dealt me one more card. It was the two of spades, which gave me a pair.

“You’re next, Misha.”

“I’ll draw as well. Give me two.” Misha’s expression didn’t change when she looked at her new cards. When Yu was around, she was the very picture of a sophisticated beauty.

The other young ladies took their turns drawing. It seemed we were going in order of status, from the lowest commoner to the highest noble, though I couldn’t see the point in it.

“Next is Claire.”

“I’ll draw one.” It seemed Claire had a pretty good starting hand.

“And finally, me. I stand pat.” Yu uttered the very phrase none of us wanted to hear. It meant he had been dealt an amazing hand.

“Second round. How many, Rae?”

“I’ll draw five.”

“Whoa.”

Since Yu stood pat, he believed he couldn’t be beat. I didn’t think a straight would be strong enough to win, so I decided to go all-or-nothing and throw away my entire hand. The result was…nothing. No pair.

“Misha.”

“I need two.”

Each player took their turn until it came to Claire.

“One, please.” Claire smiled at the card she was dealt. She was so easy to read.

“Okay, faceup. What do you have, Rae?”

“No pair.” It probably would have been better to go for the straight.

“Heh, unlucky.”

“How about you, Misha?”

“Three of a kind.” A pretty good hand. Considering that she drew two in the first round, she’d probably been dealt the three of a kind in her starting hand.

The other girls had the same nothing hand that I did, except one, who had two pair.

“How about you, Claire?” Yu asked. “I’m guessing you have something good, with that smug look on your face.”

“Heh heh. Full house.” Hence the grin. The only hands that could beat her were four of a kind or a royal flush.

“My turn. Four of a kind.” Yu turned over four aces.

That sneaky prince.

“Hmm? Do you have something to say, Rae?”

“No, not really.”

Of course, there *was* something I wanted to say. There had been an ace of spades in my starting hand. In other words, someone was cheating, and when I thought about it, the dealer was one of Yu’s buddies. He was undoubtedly in cahoots with the prince.

“Heh heh… I see. So that’s your response, Rae.” Yu smiled unapologetically. He seemed all too pleased with himself.

“What is it, Rae? Did you do something?”

“Not at all. Though if you insist on hearing my thoughts: you are too cute, Miss Claire.”

“You can’t mess with me with that every time!”

“Rae, Let’s play again.”

“I’ll sit this one out, please.” I nonchalantly declined the prince’s request.

***

Despite being adored by Miss Claire, Thane Bauer was a boy with low self-esteem. Although gloomy, good-looking teenage boys were generally popular, in Thane's case, his stiff demeanor made people think that he was grim or antisocial.

While I had been shunned by Thane ever since the test, we still sometimes crossed paths because I was Claire's maid, and Claire was doing her best to engage him. She would sit next to him in lectures, approach him during the afternoon social hours, and choose the same meal as him in the cafeteria as a conversation starter. I thought she was being terribly brave.

However, Claire's abject talent made it difficult for Thane to open up to her, and time and again, her efforts proved fruitless. The prince might be a troubled young man, but I couldn't have him avoiding Claire forever! My goal was to love Claire and ensure her happiness, which meant supporting her love life, too.

"Hey, what's that sound?" I said.

"I hear it, too," said Lene.

"Ah…" Claire frowned.

This was our chance.

One of Thane's hobbies was playing the harp, and I now recognized what was happening: there was a game event in which the main character just happened to hear Thane playing. Thane felt inferior to the other princes in almost every respect, but neither of them could hold a candle to his skill with the harp. He was even better than world-class professionals.

In the game, the event consisted of the main character hearing him play and genuinely appreciating it. But that alone wouldn't please Thane.

"Miss Claire, this way."

"Hmm?"

"Wait, Rae…"

I beckoned for Claire, who was on her way to a tea ceremony for young ladies, to follow me. If we missed this

opportunity, there was no guarantee another would arise. It might be rude to keep the young ladies waiting, but I would much rather have Claire prioritize Thane.

"Hey, peasant, where are you going?"

"Shhh! Look, there."

Hidden in the shadow of the school building, we peered at a corner of the courtyard. As expected, in a small arbor by the pond, Thane sat alone playing the harp.

"Master Thane…"

"My… What an amazing sound."

Claire and Lene were overcome with admiration. Thane's music was like fine velvet, interwoven with subtlety and elegance.

"How marvelous, Master Thane!" Claire cried out without thinking and ran toward the arbor, ignoring the fact that Thane was still in the middle of the song.

"Miss Claire! Wait!"

Thane wouldn't accept admiration no matter what you said. The best course of action was to wait until he was done playing to approach him. Sure enough, he stopped the instant he heard someone and looked moodily at Claire.

"You're…from House François."

"My name is Claire. It would honor me if you could remember it next we meet."

"Oh… Right." Thane started to put away his harp.

"Oh. Are you finished already? I would love to hear more."

"This is just a bit of goofing off… It's not good enough to play in front of people."

"You can't be serious. It was so lovely."

"The harp… Its only value is aesthetic. It has nothing to do with the qualities required of a king." Thane closed the harp's case.

The only thing Thane cared about was becoming a great king, and as such, the only abilities he valued were those required to rule. He idolized His Majesty l'Ausseil Bauer but thought himself unsuited to follow in his footsteps.

"Well then, shall we play a game that tests the skills required to rule a kingdom?" I said.

"Huh?" Thane raised his eyebrows at my question. "You're Rae Taylor. I heard you were Claire's maid."

Why did he have to go and remember my name? I wished he would remember Claire's instead!

"Indeed, and my role brings me great happiness every single day," I said.

"What's this game you speak of? Chess? I heard you're good."

And why did he know so much about me? If he was that observant, I wish he'd use it to notice the furious glare coming from Claire, who had hit maximum jealousy levels.

"It's called the King's Game." Or as we called it in Japan, the *Ousama* Game. I was lying, of course. The game in no way measured the skills necessary to rule a kingdom.

"Hmm… Sounds interesting. How do you play?"

I explained. Every round, each player drew a card with a number written on it, and whoever drew number one was the king for that round. The king then issued orders to the others without knowing who held what card, like "number X and number Y have to do Z."

"And this really measures the qualities of a king?" Thane asked.

"Indeed."

"Sounds good… Let's do it."

I quickly drew up sheets of paper and numbered them one to four. Thane, Claire and Lene each drew one, and I took the one that was left.

"Okay, who's the king?" I asked.

“What are you talking about?”

“This is how the game is played. We check the numbers we drew, and then everyone asks who the king is together.”

“I see…”

“Okay then, one more time.”

“Who is the king? The first king is…”

“Oh, it’s me.”

It was Thane. As I’d expected.

Thane had a hidden setting called the “Hard-to-read, lucky prince.” Most *Revolution* players were confused by this title. What was lucky about being sandwiched between two highly skilled brothers, having an insurmountable inferiority complex, and being romantically pursued by the villainess, Claire? The official explanation was as follows: due to having such exceptional brothers, Thane was always surrounded by other talented people, which was good fortune in the long run. That explanation didn’t explain what was fortunate about Claire, of course, but the point was that Thane was lucky in a way that wasn’t immediately obvious.

“Now then, Master Thane. What is your order?”

“Er… Um… Well…” It seemed Thane couldn’t decide on a command. He might have been a prince, but he didn’t have much experience pushing people around. It didn’t come as naturally to him as it did to the self-absorbed Rod and sly Yu.

He hemmed and hawed for a while and finally settled. “Number two will hold hands with number three.”

“I’m number two!” I said.

“Er… I’m number three,” said Claire.

“Now, Miss Claire, hold out your hand.”

“I suppose I have no choice.”

I took Claire's slender hand in mine. It was small and delicate, and I felt it might break if I squeezed too hard. Enjoying the sensation, I rubbed the back of her hand with my thumb.

"Ergh! What are you doing?!"

"I just wanted to admire the smoothness of your skin."

"Just hold it like normal! That's enough, right? Let's move on."

"Ah, you're right. Okay, second round."

We drew again.

"Who is the king? The second king is…"

"I-It's me." It was Lene. She seemed flustered at the thought of her, a commoner, possibly giving orders to a member of the royal family. After thinking about it even longer than Thane had, she finally said, "Number four, please stroke the head of number two."

"I'm number four…" Thane said.

"A-and I'm number two," stammered Claire.

Now we were getting somewhere. Way to go, Lene! This was…not part of Thane's unobvious good fortune.

"I don't believe a woman's hair should be stroked so frivolously…"

"But, Master Thane, these are the rules."

"But…"

"Master Thane, I'm fine with it." Aw, Claire probably wanted to tell him to hurry up and do it. She was so adorable.

"Well then… I apologize for this." Thane bashfully reached out his hand and gently stroked her hair.

"Heh…" Claire was delighted.

"That's enough, I think… Next." Thane pulled his hand away before even ten seconds had passed, his face bright red.

"Yes. Okay, third round."

“Who is the king? The third king is…”

“Oh, me.”

It was me, and I wanted to make sure to give an order that would get Claire and Thane closer together. I glanced at Lene, who met my eyes and blinked three times.

The truth was that Lene and I had gone into the game with shared plans to cheat. We’d decided that when one of us became king, the other would blink her eyes to convey her number. Lene’s three blinks put her at number three this round, making Claire and Thane numbers two and four. That meant I needed to issue an order that would work no matter which number each one had.

“Now, number two and number four, please kiss,” I ordered.

“What?!”

“W-wait a second, peasant!”

Thane had gone glassy-eyed, and Claire was distraught.

“This is going much too far,” said Thane.

“Th-that’s right,” said Claire.

“What?” I blinked. “But the king’s orders are absolute. Now hurry, please.”

“Okay…” Thane said.

“Master Thane?!” Claire opened her eyes wide at Thane’s unexpected response.

“Now, kiss—”

Thane changed tracks. “No, wait a second…”

“Master Thane?”

Where Thane was resolute, Claire sounded weak.

“What does this game have to do with the qualities of a king?” Thane turned to me, eyes hard. “Are you making fun of me?”

His face said my answer would determine if I would ever be forgiven. Hmm. Maybe this was where the tides turned.

“I knew you would figure it out, Master Thane!”

“What?”

“The real game was to see whether or not you would ascertain the truth.” More lies, of course. “If you, Master Thane, had accepted that order without question, it would prove you don’t have the qualities of a true king.”

“You were…testing me?”

“Please forgive me. But I thought you deserved proof that you truly do have the qualities of a king, Master Thane.”

A silence hung over us. Thane wore a confused expression; he clearly disliked the fact that someone had dared test him, but being simultaneously recognized for having the qualities of a king wasn’t altogether bad.

“I’m going home.”

“Master Thane!”

Thane stood and left the arbor without another word, expressionless. Claire watched him go, seeming anxious.

“Rae.”

“Yes, Lene?”

“Is what you just said true?”

“Oh no, I just wanted to tease Miss Claire.”

“What?! You peasant…!”

Either way, Thane hadn’t taken advantage of being king to give orders that pushed peoples’ boundaries, and he’d stood his ground instead of giving in to the pressure of the moment when ordered to kiss. In my opinion, these were profoundly valuable qualities.

“Miss Claire.”

“What is it?”

“How did it feel to have your head stroked by Thane?”

Claire’s response was explicit.

I was glad to hear she’d enjoyed herself.

***

“Hey, Rae. Are you what they call gay?”

Misha dropped this bombshell on me while I was eating lunch. Claire and Lene choked.

“Uh, Misha. Asking a question like that has no good outcome…”

“Misha, I don’t think this is something you should just ask in public.”

Both Claire and Lene were telling her to change the subject.

“I don’t mind,” I said. “Do you want to hear my answer?”

“As your best friend, yes.”

It touched me that she’d gone to the trouble of asking outright, even if it might make things somewhat awkward.

“Hmm…” I said. “Well, I’m not sure, but probably. I’ve never had that special kind of feeling for a guy.”

Claire inched away from me when I said this. I inched toward her the same amount that she had inched away. In turn, she inched away that same amount again.

“Why are you moving away from me?” I asked.

“Because I’m afraid of what you will do to me.”

“But I’m not going to do anything.”

“I wonder.”

I was used to this kind of reaction. My previous world often portrayed gay people as aggressively targeting all

members of the same gender, making it common for people to say, “Well don’t hit on me,” once they found out you were gay. This world didn’t have the same range of media mine did, but queerness was depicted much the same way in music and fiction.

And that was why I was surprised by Misha’s reaction: “Miss Claire. You’re being prejudiced. I might even say discriminatory.”

“What? Why?”

“Think about it. You are heterosexual, are you not?”

“Of course!”

“And you like Master Thane, right?” I chimed in.

“Rae, don’t interrupt. Shut up for a minute,” Claire snapped. She looked genuinely angry with me. I held my tongue.

“How would you feel if a boy told you, ‘Don’t hit on me’?” Misha continued.

“How dare he think me so desperate!”

“Exactly. But that’s exactly how you’re treating Rae.”

“Oh…” Claire looked shocked, despite herself.

Misha had a surprisingly level-headed and balanced perspective on things. Queer people only differed from others in their preferences; they weren’t any more lustful than other people, and they didn’t indiscriminately pursue sex or romance.

“W-well… It’s just that Rae happens to like women, too, I suppose,” Lene said. “It just means that gender is irrelevant to romance for her.”

“That’s not right,” I said.

“Huh?”

“Gender *is* relevant.”

“R-really?”

Bisexual people existed, for one, and those who identified as gay or lesbian might consider themselves to not be attracted to a particular gender so much as to a particular person—well, it was complicated. But now that I thought about it, I, personally, wasn't into men. Gender was definitely relevant to me.

"I see. I suppose I don't really know much about these things."

"Well, that's normal. There isn't much opportunity to learn."

Queer people were still overwhelmingly closeted in this world, which was rife with prejudice and nurtured little understanding. As I noted, the queer people depicted in story were either the sex fiends Claire imagined or the free-loving sort Lene had in mind. Diversity and acceptance were a long way off.

"Is there any objectionable behavior I ought to change?" Lene asked.

"No, not really. I'm just happy to dote on Claire every day," I said.

"It's because you're always saying those sorts of things that I worry!" Claire whined.

Perhaps that was true, and if I was overstepping boundaries, then that was my bad. But the fact of the matter was, Japanese entertainers in my past life had often used their sexuality as part of their brand despite the discrimination they faced. That was probably why I acted this way.

"I just can't live without poking fun at you," I said, laughing. But I was laughing alone.

"Rae… You…" Misha gave me an anxious look.

Ugh. This was exactly why I hadn't really wanted to talk about this.

"It's okay, it's okay. I'm used to my love being unrequited."

It was true. No matter whom I had feelings for, they never liked me back. But there was nothing to be done about that; no one I felt for was in the wrong for not returning my interest. I was just unlucky.

Besides, it wasn't just queer people who experienced frustration in love. I glanced up at Lene.

"Hmm? What is it, Rae?"

"No, it's nothing."

"So, you've given up on Miss Claire then, Rae?" asked Misha.

"You are really trying to cover everything today, aren't you, Misha?"

"I'm sorry if I'm making you uncomfortable."

"No, that's not the case. Well, I guess I have given up in a way, but in another way, I also haven't."

"What does that mean?" Lene asked.

"I don't expect Miss Claire to return my feelings. Miss Claire is interested in someone else, and I want to support that. I'm happy just being near her. But even so—"

"But what?" Now Claire had joined in questioning me.

"But even so, I think it would be almost impossible to just completely give up on you, Miss Claire," I teased, laughing again. No one else laughed this time, either. I needed to stop. "At any rate, Miss Claire, please continue to act the way you always have. I am quite happy with our current arrangement."

"I see…"

"Of course, you're welcome to fall in love with me at any time."

"I will not."

"Of course you won't."

Thanks to Claire's immediate rejection, the mood returned to normal. That was perfect. All we had to do was

keep the status quo.

"Okay, let's change the subject," I said. "Oh, Miss Claire, shall we go have our daily makeout session?"

"I will not, and I have never!"

"There you go again. It's not that bad, you know."

"Wait till you're in bed to talk in your sleep!" Claire retorted.

"Ha ha ha."

The serious talk had finally ended. I teased Claire, Claire got angry, Lene soothed her, and Misha watched it all happen with a resigned look. Things were back to normal.

Normal. And like always, I felt a tiny, little bit…bitter about it.

In my past life, there were a number of LGBTQ activists who had criticized the entertainers using their flamboyant sexuality as a selling point on TV. I think their criticism was likely on point. But here's what else I think: Without going so far as to say it's the right or wrong thing to do, some people out there can't live their lives without making light of their problems.

Of course these entertainers were contributing to homophobic stereotypes. And of course I'd prefer it if we could eliminate homophobia altogether. But some queer people living in the real world will also, inevitably, act in ways that highlight the prejudices they experience. Maybe they'll have other reasons for acting the way they do, but I think that need to lampshade their problems is one of them.

Some people can't live with their burdens without cracking wise about them.

When you're queer and you fall in love with someone who can never respond to your feelings in kind, they often still behave more intimately with you than they would with someone of the opposite sex. But after the moment you realize you're in love with them, that just makes them feel even further away. If you run into this problem again and again,

before you realize it, you might become the kind of person who can only helplessly laugh the whole thing off. Not everyone ends up like that, of course. It just so happened that I had.

"Miss Claire."

"What is it?"

"You hate me, right?" It was my usual question.

I never asked her if she liked me.

I couldn't.

I already knew the answer.

"Of course I do."

"Yes, I know."

And we continued as usual.

Even if she didn't get me, even if my feelings were unrequited, I liked Claire. There was no future for us; I knew that. But even so, I couldn't help hoping.

It would be so much easier if I just fell in love with another lesbian, I thought to myself. But love was something you fell into. You didn't get to choose whom you loved.

Romance really was troublesome.

***

Magic was a state-of-the-art technology in this world. If this were Japan, magic would be the IT sector and magic tools would be cutting-edge home appliances. Of course, these things weren't limited to home use in the Bauer Kingdom; magic and magic tools saw widespread use in the government and military. Like I said before, magical advancement and expertise were what distinguished a country in this age.

Our magic class was conducted on an athletic field outside of the Academy, bordering a wood. We stood in a loose group as our teacher took his place before us.

“A magical stone is the core element of a magic tool.” Our teacher pointed to the tip of a magic wand, the most basic of magic tools, in which a stone of mysteriously indistinct color was embedded.

Magical stones produced various phenomena in reaction to a wielder’s magical power. In general, the larger and purer the stone, the greater the intensity of the associated phenomena. The mining and sale of magical stones was managed by the government in every country. In the Bauer Kingdom, Lene’s family, the Aurousseaus of the Aurousseau Company, had been tasked with the mining and distribution of these stones under the king’s orders. That put them in a significant position of power.

“Now then, everyone. Please create a magic bullet and send it toward your target.”

Following the teacher’s instructions, everyone started sending their magic bullets at the target, which was about seventy-five feet away. This was mainly a form of combat magic. It was too weak for military use, but it did come in handy for self-defense—which didn’t just mean protection from human criminals.

“Monsters are weak against core magical stones. Each attribute has specific compatibilities, and there are four combinations that are especially effective.”

Yup. This world had monsters, too.

The monsters had appeared at the same as the discovery of the first magical stones. The generally accepted theory was that animals turned into monsters when they consumed said stones. Once they transformed, their strength skyrocketed and their forms changed. Some were no longer even recognizably linked to animals, instead resembling fairy tale creatures.

“Rae, you haven’t been paying attention. Are you all right?” Misha was eyeing me with a strange look on her face.

“Ah…Misha.” I’d been daydreaming.

“Even a dual-caster like you shouldn’t neglect her studies.”

“Yes, yes, you’re right.”

Deciding to get serious about my magic bullet practice, I aimed at the target and waved my wand. A black and blue magic bullet flew forth. Color represented attributes in magic: black for earth, blue for water, red for fire, and white for wind. Generally, the darker the color, the stronger the magical power.

The magic bullet I fired flew in a straight line, hitting the thick wooden target and shattering it to pieces. Silence fell.

“Oh.”

Everyone’s eyes pierced me like needles. Apparently, I’d underestimated my power. I looked regretfully at the target, which was busted beyond repair.

“Hmph!”

The target right next to the one I’d broken caught fire and fell to pieces. This time, it was Claire who’d demolished it.

“Don’t try to show off. You don’t need to be a dual-caster to do that,” Claire lifted her chin and laughed.

“Miss Claire…”

“Wh-what is it?”

“You’re so cool! Please marry me.”

“Why would I do that?!”

“Hey now, keep your wits about you. Magic is dangerous when used irresponsibly. Pay close attention when wielding it,” the teacher gently reprimanded us. I’d earned it; this was my bad.

“I’m sorry.”

“Please excuse me,” Claire also apologized, bowing her head low.

The teacher, a middle-aged man, was named Mr. Torrid. While his attributes were only of medium rank, he was the only confirmed tri-caster in the kingdom and its first real scholar of magic. The Bauer Kingdom had started a step

behind other countries when it came to magical research. They dominated the surrounding countries in military strength, and this had made them complacent, leading them to underestimate the value of new magic technology until the best researchers had all been enticed to other countries. Even after the king came up with his magic-focused meritocratic policy, Bauer lagged behind.

That was when Mr. Torrid burst onto the scene like a comet. The reigning basic theories of magic—mining magical stones, the development of magical tools—the very foundations of magical technology in this kingdom had been determined by Mr. Torrid, who had been awarded the status of a knight for his contribution. Claire, who respected excellence, admired him deeply.

"It looks like you've all got the hang of magic wands and bullets. Let's move on to systemic magic." Mr. Torrid got the class' attention by clapping his hands loudly. "Magic relies heavily on an individual's innate ability but also depends on their attributes."

With that, he aimed the palm of his hand at the target. The earth around it rose to form a wall.

"Earth magic is mainly used for defense. Building a wall is a basic skill. Some talented mages can even erect entire castle ramparts."

Next, he threw a flame bullet at the earth wall. The earthen wall dried, cracked, and part of it tumbled down.

"Fire magic is primarily deployed for combat. Basic uses include shooting fire arrows and bullets. A more advanced example would be creating a sea of flames."

Finally, Mr. Torrid approached the wall of earth and put his hand on the missing section. The wall rebuilt itself before our eyes, as if time had been turned back.

"Water magic is principally called on for recovery. It can be used to cure wounds and diseases. They say extremely skilled wielders can even regenerate lost body parts, though no one can raise the dead."

Our teacher returned his earth wall to the ground.

“I am unable to wield the wind attribute, but it is mainly used in a supporting role. When combined with fire magic, an attack is made stronger, when combined with water magic, recovery is faster, and so on. However, be careful, as it is not quite as compatible with its opposing attribute, earth.”

The lecture complete, Mr. Torrid instructed us to try what he had shown us while he conferred separately with the wind attribute students. Misha, who had a high-level wind attribute, was first in line to consult the teacher.

“Hey, Rae.”

“Good morning.”

“Good morning, Master Rod. Master Yu.”

As the princes approached, I looked around for Thane and saw he was by Mr. Torrid. That was right—he had the wind attribute, too.

“You sure didn’t pull your punches on that target. It was exactly what we expected.”

“We’re not very good at magic, so we’re a bit jealous.”

“Heh.” I didn’t exactly dislike being praised by the princes, but there was someone whose compliments I much preferred. “Miss Claire?”

“What is it? I’m a bit busy right now.”

“Don’t you have any praise for me?”

“What brought this on all of a sudden?” Claire frowned with a look of resignation.

At our interaction, Rod and then Yu chuckled. “You guys really are close.”

“That isn’t remotely true. I don’t remember ever accepting this person as a friend.”

“What do you think about that, Rae?”

“This is exactly why I love Miss Claire.”

“That’s enough…” Claire looked exhausted.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

“And if I’m not, whose fault is it?!”

“It’s mine! I’m sorry! I love you!”

Another day, another episode arguing like an old married couple (at least in my mind).

That was when we heard the scream.

The monster was transparent and amorphous, like one of the slime monsters you meet in role-playing games, but nearly thirty feet tall and much scarier. Its surface was pale blue and spongy, and within its transparent body floated a magical stone just like Mr. Torrid had described. Slowly but surely, it rolled toward us across the field.

“It’s a water slime, and it’s big!” someone called out.

Water slimes were medium-threat monsters, meaning they could be defeated by five or six combatants working in concert. However, this water slime was unusually large—the size of a small house.

Most people thought of slimes as cute little creatures, but they were by no means weak. Physical attacks were pointless, and those who recklessly got too close could be swallowed whole.

“Everyone, get back!” Mr. Torrid moved in front of us, magic wand in hand. He threw a quick fire bomb, but it fizzled on the slime’s surface, leaving no injuries of consequence. Even so, he threw a second and third fire bomb, keeping the slime focused on him.

“Rae, you get back, too!”

Misha grabbed my arm to try and get me to evacuate the area with her, but I shrugged her off and rushed to Mr. Torrid’s side.

“You! Hurry up and get out of here!”

“That monster is of the water attribute. You can’t use wind, right?”

Wind was the most effective counter against water. It was like rock-paper-scissors: fire beat earth, earth beat wind, wind beat water, and water beat fire.

“Be that as it may, I must hold it off!”

“Let me help you.” I thrust my wand forward to deploy my magic and generate a wall of earth around the slime.

“Goodness. The ability to erect such a mighty wall in an instant… I can’t believe you’re a beginner.”

“Teacher, please tell the others to use their attack magic!”

“O-oh, yes.” Mr. Torrid called out to the rest of the class and instructed them to attack with all their might. “Fire!”

At his command, a storm of magic bullets and arrows rained down on the slime. Despite the variation in projectile size—due to differences in skill—the sheer number was impressive. One after another, the bullets hit the slime, and it started to emit smoke.

“Did we do it?” someone sputtered.

“GAAAAAAAHH!”

The slime was alive and well. Though I had no idea where its mouth was, it let out a high-pitched scream that echoed fiercely, forcing the students to cower and freeze. This was an ability monsters had, referred to colloquially as a “Hateful Cry.”

“Argh…”

Mr. Torrid and I were fine, but this was strange. In my head, I’d figured I would immobilize the monster and have everyone attack, and then the battle would be over. Since I was a dual-caster, I was able to erect walls and attack with magic at the same time, but I was already using my earth attribute for defense and my other, water, was the same as the slime’s—it wouldn’t do any good in this situation. I didn’t know what else to do.

“Let’s retreat! Leave it to the army.”

“We can’t—some students have been paralyzed. We can’t leave them!”

“Argh…”

Incidentally, when this event occurred in the game, a hero swooped in to save the heroine when the monster was about to attack her. The game presented the player with three names, and they selected one to call on for help. The options were:

Rod

Yu

Thane

Well, I wasn’t about to call any of those three.

Rod

Yu

Thane

Claire (NEW!!)

“Miss Claire! Save us!”

“Oh… Uh…” Claire, surprised at my call, couldn’t move. Had she also been affected by the Hateful Cry? This was bad.

“Hang on! Claire François!” Thane shook Claire’s shoulders. Thane, who was often thought of as incompetent because of his two brothers, actually had the highest aptitude for magic of the three, meaning he recovered more swiftly from the effects of the Hateful Cry.

“Thane…”

“I swear I’ll support you. Attack the slime with everything you’ve got.”

“I-I…”

“It’s okay. You can do this.” Thane’s attribute was wind, but he was a support magic specialist—another reason why his route wasn’t as popular as his brothers’. If he could support Claire’s magic, though, her attack would be fantastically effective.

It wasn’t a big deal or anything, but looking at this shared moment, I kind of wished the developers had included the heroine when putting together such a potentially moving scene.

“I-I got it!” Strength returned to Claire’s eyes. She stood tall, facing down the slime together with Thane.

“Okay!”

“Haah!” Claire fired a magic spear. Perhaps due to the love she felt for Thane, the flaming weapon was exceptionally large.

“Enchanted wind!” As Thane cast his magic, the color of the flame spear changed. Wind magic could combine with a spell to change its attribute—it was an advanced implementation, but Thane and his royal brothers had been practicing magic since they were children.

The super-sized magical wind spear tore a huge hole through the massive slime, which screamed as it melted and collapsed.

“It worked…” Mr. Torrid breathed a sigh of relief.

Recovering from the paralysis of the Hateful Cry, the students started calling out in belated appreciation.

“Amazing, Miss Claire!”

“How could you defeat such a fearsome monster?!”

Claire’s entourage rushed to her side, and they weren’t alone. Everyone heaped praise on Claire, who looked bashful, but smiled happily.

Only one person slowly peeled himself from the crowd. It was Thane. He’d played a key role in the slime’s defeat, but

it was hard for amateurs to comprehend the degree to which he'd contributed. Mr. Torrid could, of course, but at the moment, he was scanning the area for other monsters.

One person did, however, run right up to Thane—Claire. She escaped from the crowd, calling out to him, "Master Thane!"

He didn't answer, though he turned to Claire's voice, looking like it was the last thing he wanted to do.

"Um, thank you very much. I could have never bested that slime without you."

"That's not true. You would have been fine even without me. But—" Thane's blank expression softened for a moment, "You did a good job."

With those words and a little smile, he stroked Claire's hair.

"Thank you…" Claire stiffened in surprise, then relaxed and smiled more genuinely than I'd ever seen her smile.

What in the world was I doing in the middle of this romantic comedy?

"Oh, there she is." I crouched down in the field. I had wandered off from the group as well; I was in search of something quite small.

Before my eyes was a tiny drop of water, only a fraction the size of the massive water slime we'd just defeated. When I held out my hand, it quivered on a blade of grass.

This was the massive water slime's baby. She'd attacked us because of a fire arrow that missed its target and hit her when she was passing by with her baby. In other words, she'd been acting in self-defense.

"It's okay. C'mon now." I gently cradled the baby slime with both hands. She was shivering, probably still scared.

It was possible to tame monsters if you shared an attribute with them—which was the case here. Monsters that had been tamed were called familiars.

“Here, I’ll make you my familiar. You can sign the contract here.” With a gentle finger, I touched the magic stone at the slime’s core and fed a pulse of my magical power into it. At that, the core changed from blue to gold: the sign of a familiar. “I’m so sorry about your mom. But it’s okay; I’ll be your mom now.”

I stroked the surface of the slime. It was cold and a little wriggly, like gelatin.

“I’ll have to think of a name for you.”

So I said, but I’d already decided on a name way back when I was playing *Revolution*.

“Your name is Ralaire.” Rae and Claire together made Ralaire. I thought it was a fantastic name. “Let’s be friends, Ralaire.”

Ralaire made herself quiver again, as if in reply.

“Peasant! Where did you go?!”

When I got back to the class, for some reason Claire was angry.

“I was just taking care of something.”

I slipped Ralaire into my pocket. I figured I would introduce her to everyone eventually, but this wasn’t a good time.

“I wanted to go home, but I didn’t see you, so we had to stay and look for you,” Claire complained.

“Sorry!”

“Hmph. This is exactly what I’m talking about…”

I thought Claire would go on and on about her disgust at my insensitive peasant behavior, but there were no further jibes. I wondered why for a moment, but then—

“Well… You did quite well, for a commoner.”

“Huh?”

“I’m saying you faced the monster well!”

Oh, my. “Is it flirting time, then? Finally.”

“It is not?! What is flirting time?! That just sounds horrible!” Claire was squawking again, trying to hide her embarrassment.

Even if she didn’t like someone, she gave credit where credit was due. That was another reason why I liked her so much.

“Miss Claire.”

“Wh-what is it?”

“I’m glad you’re safe.”

“Hmph…” She turned in a huff and started walking away. “What are you dawdling for?! Let’s go!”

“Yes!”

I followed behind Claire, happy as could be. If I were a dog, I would have been wagging my tail.

***

A few days after the monster incident, I was sitting in front of Claire. Misha was present, too, with the expression of one who didn’t want to get involved. Meanwhile, Claire’s looked like she might never forgive me.

“And? Just what are you going to do with it?” Claire demanded.

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t play dumb!” She was pointing to Ralaire, held in my arms, as if she were about to burst with rage. “Isn’t that a monster?!”

Let’s start over.

Since I was Claire’s maid, I was generally always by her side. This was a huge difference from the game, where the

heroine was normally with Misha, but it was exactly what I'd always dreamed of, so I was quite pleased with the arrangement.

The problem was Ralaire.

Ralaire was a baby water slime. All living things have relentless appetites when they're infants; even human babies have to nurse ten to fifteen times a day. Slimes don't cry until they're adults, but they do quiver with hunger if their stomachs are empty. Ralaire was still small enough to fit in the palm of my hand, so I was keeping her in my bag, but she was a mischievous little love. Since she didn't have a fixed shape, she could slip out even if I closed my bag tight. I'd lost count of how many times she'd snuck out during lectures in order to tell me she was hungry. Each time, I rushed to tuck her back into my bag and surreptitiously feed her.

It might sound like she had me dancing to her tune, but I trained my pets well. I knew exactly how to train a water slime, thanks to my knowledge of the game, and Ralaire was gradually learning to wait before she ate her food, as well as where to relieve herself. Most of this training was done in my own room. I'd explained the situation to Misha, who was afraid at first, but she soon realized Ralaire posed no danger and began to help me out.

That was probably why we let our guard down.

"Hey, peasant, where did you put my brush? Lene has been looking for it all night," Claire said as she burst into our room—and laid eyes on Ralaire.

"Miss Claire, as a noble, I would expect you to at least knock."

"Aaaagh!"

"Agh?"

"Gaaagh?!"

The only reason Claire's screams didn't resonate through the dormitory, where everyone was sleeping, was

thanks to Misha's wind magic.

And that was where we were now.

"What are you thinking, bringing a monster into human territory?!"

"Ralaire isn't a monster anymore, she's a familiar—"

"Shut up! It's a monster! Have you forgotten what happened a few days ago?!" The look on Claire's face suggested it was painful to remember. "And you, Misha. How could you let this happen?"

"I have no excuse. But Ralaire really is sweet."

"Ralaire?"

"It seems that's her name," Misha told her, expressionless.

"Rae and Claire make Ralaire! She's christened for the bond of our love!" I declared.

"Don't make me a parent without even asking me! What are you doing?!"

"Huh? It's a good name, right?"

"Think about how I feel with my name taken by a monster!"

"You're so selfish."

"Me?! What have I done wrong?!" Claire was squawking again.

"Please, calm down and see for yourself. See? Isn't she cute?" I held Ralaire up in front of Claire.

"It's not cute! It's a monster!"

"No really, when you look at her this way, isn't she just adorable?"

"No!"

"You're so *selfish*."

“Me?! What have I done wrong?!”

It was like we were on loop.

“That’s enough,” Claire fumed. “I’ll tell Mr. Torrid, and he’ll get rid of it.”

“Please wait, Miss Claire,” I called after her as she turned away.

“What is it? You can’t stop me.”

“Can you please watch this before you decide?”

“Hmm?”

I dropped Ralaire on the floor. “Ralaire, stay.”

Ralaire stopped moving and waited.

“Sit,” I said.

She got a bit smaller.

“Lay down.”

She got even smaller.

“Turn around.”

She spun in place… At least, I think she did.

“What do you think?!” I asked Claire, excitedly.

“Don’t look so self-satisfied! It barely did anything at all!”

“Right?” Misha agreed.

I sighed, “If you can’t detect these changes, then you’re both unqualified.”

“I have no interest in becoming slime-qualified!”

“Okay then, last resort. Ralaire, undine.”

At my instruction, Ralaire shivered and began to change shape.

“Wh-what’s happening?”

“Just watch.”

Little by little, Ralaire morphed into a familiar shape—that of a miniature Claire.

“This is…”

“It’s undine!”

“Undine, as in the water spirit?”

“Yes!”

Undine was a water spirit who appeared in fairy tales and bestowed upon humans the bounty of water. While it was commonly believed spirits were different from monsters, being made of nothing but air, their existence was widely accepted, with even institutions like churches dedicated to their worship.

“Why does it look like me?”

“Water slimes have a custom of imitating the appearance of beautiful women.” That was only a half-lie—it was more true that water slimes could mimic their surroundings in self-defense.

“R-really?”

“Yes!”

“When you put it that way, it does look pretty charming…” Claire was now tickling Ralaire with her finger. She was so easy.

“Right? Right?”

At this rate, Claire might as well forfeit her title of villainess. Meanwhile, I could change mine from heroine to zero-ine!

“Well, fine then. I won’t have it disposed of.”

“Thank you! You are so kind, Miss Claire!”

“But you’d better train it properly. And you need to stop hiding it—you must introduce it to everyone.”

Claire was talking to me like a mother would talk to a child. Was this what they call motherly instinct?

“But,” she continued, “pick a name besides Ralaire. Don’t use my name without asking.”

“Oh, it’s too late now.”

“Too late?!”

Once a familiar recognized its name, it never forgot. That was why their names couldn’t be changed in the game.

“Let’s keep being good friends, Ralaire,” I told the slime.

“I object! I object to that name!”

I was ready to introduce Ralaire to everyone the next day, but ultimately, her namesake stopped me.

Come on, really?

Chapter 2:
Academy Knights

WHAT DO YOU picture when you hear the word "knight"? Probably a strong gentleman clad in plate armor, right?

Those kinds of knights existed in *Revolution* but were considered a bit old-fashioned. The troops who directly served the kingdom were now called soldiers. The army was mainly responsible for protecting the borders against encroachment from the neighboring Nur Empire, which had a contentious relationship with the Bauer Kingdom. Their gear was generally not full plate armor but leather and cloth that allowed for better mobility, primarily because the development of magical tools had done away with the need for heavy armor.

Back on topic. The reason I brought up knights was…

"And so, the Academy Knights selection test will be held again this year, for those who are interested."

It was Saturday, and the man speaking in the Academy lecture hall was Lorek Kugret, current commander of the Academy Knights. The Kugrets were a military family, with many of their members holding important posts in the army. As one of the first houses to recognize the importance of magic, they had employed the teachings of Mr. Torrid early on and thereby maintained their power despite the changing times. I didn't know much about the Kugret daughter, Loretta, who was a member of Claire's entourage. However, her brother, Lorek, had a personality stiff enough to crack wood.

The Academy Knights was a self-governed organization within the Royal Academy. It was comprised of students selected from the Academy, traditionally from royal and noble families, the topmost of whom was given authority equivalent to a teacher. It was an elite, consciously exclusive group that resembled a combination of a student council and disciplinary committee at a normal school. Of course, as the name

suggested, the Academy Knights were also expected to participate in defending the student body in emergencies, so it wasn't just an honorary title.

"I'm going to take it, of course," Rod volunteered first. Of course he'd jump at the chance to join an organization of power within the Academy.

"I'll take it, too." Yu was next to volunteer. His magic level was average, but he had defensive skills he had been honing since childhood. "Thane, you too."

"Honestly… It just sounds like a pain."

Rod smacked Thane on the behind, and Thane raised his hand begrudgingly. Given his personality, he probably wasn't interested in being a part of such a group, but it would be bad for appearances if any royalty sat out.

"I appreciate the participation of the princes. Anyone else?"

"I want to try, too," piped up Claire.

"Miss Claire, perhaps the load is a bit too heavy for a woman?"

"How prejudiced. I may not have as much muscle as the boys, but given the prerequisites of wielding magic and performing daily clerical tasks, I am more than qualified to take the test as well." Claire was dignified in her justification. Commander Lorek seemed a bit reluctant, but as a capable commander, his hesitance was short-lived, and he agreed.

"Then I'll take it, too," I volunteered. If Claire was going to try, I had to join her. For love. Incidentally, in the game, it was possible to be selected even without taking the test.

Claire's irritation when I raised my hand was blatant, "You can't."

"Huh? How can you say that after you lost to me in every test subject except etiquette?"

"Argh! I won't lose to you on the next test, you watch!" Cute as ever. "Misha, you take it, too. If this peasant passes,

someone will need to reel her in."

"I'm not Rae's keeper…" Misha said, but she raised her hand, as did a number of other students.

Lorek jotted down all the names.

"The test will begin tomorrow morning. There will be two subjects: clerical and magic. Now, excuse me," Lorek said and left the room.

"Hmph. Someone as lowly as you could never become an Academy Knight." Claire stuck her nose in the air.

"It's exciting that all three of you will be taking the test," said Rod.

"We're going to have to work that much harder, huh, Thane?" said Yu.

"I don't care."

All three princes had come over to us. Rod had confidence to spare, Yu had just enough, and Thane just looked depressed.

"You're very loyal," Misha said to me, "but you don't really want to be an Academy Knight, do you?"

"Mmm. I just want to be with Miss Claire."

"I thought so." Misha sighed, knowing she couldn't change my mind.

"Master Rod, do you know what we will be tested on? All he said was that there were clerical and magic components," Claire said. It was common knowledge that all generations of royalty had belonged to the Knights, so she probably figured he might know.

"You know I can't tell you that. But you'll find out tomorrow, and anyway, you don't really have time to prepare."

"I suppose that's true."

I, of course, knew what was coming since I had played *Revolution*. The exam was divided into a written and a practical portion. The written section covered Academy rules

and clerical work. The Academy rules were common knowledge, and the clerical problems weren't very complicated, making this a simple test of intelligence.

The real challenge was the practical section. This portion had previously tested students' handling of weapons like swords and spears but had since shifted to assessing magical power. As I said before, innate magical power was unrelated to family status, but since most commoners didn't consider being a member of the Academy Knights as great an honor as the nobles did, not as many bothered to take the test. Commoner students were far more concerned with the official government examination, which was more profitable than honor.

While I was recalling all this, Claire was glaring at me. "Commoner, this will be our battle!"

I'd been expecting this. Claire liked competition, and this would be our second opportunity to face each other in a challenge.

"If you don't make the Academy Knights, then you will leave the Academy," she declared.

"What? No, I don't want that."

"Just think about it for a minute!"

"Fine. Then let's use the same conditions as the last test."

"Wait a minute. Are you going to trick me again?"

Oh no. She'd learned from her mistakes! "No, I wouldn't be that mean. How about this? If I fail, you lose. If I pass, I win."

"Okay… Wait! That would mean I lose either way?!"

Ah, she'd noticed. I amended my conditions. "Fine, then. If I fail, you win. If I pass, I win."

"Can't it be that I win if I pass?"

"But you'll definitely pass, Miss Claire. That would make it too easy for you to win."

“Fine. So, what if you win?”

“The same as before. You will grant me one favor.”

“Fine.”

“Then the battle is on.”

Just like last time, we swore to God in front of Misha.

***

The following day, the Academy Knight candidates returned to the classroom.

“Good morning, Miss Claire. Let’s do our best today!”

“Shut up, peasant. I have no intention of failing.”

“Oh? So you’re worried about me? Thank you!”

“I said nothing of the sort!”

Commander Lorek appeared and dropped a stack of papers, which seemed to be the test sheets, on the table at the front of the classroom with a thud. “Everyone, thank you for your application. This year we are planning to accept five new candidates. Please do your best.”

There was a buzz among the applicants. Five was fewer than had been generally expected. I’d already known, of course.

“First, the written test. Please note that this is an elimination round. Those who fail to pass will not be invited to take the practical test, but are welcome to take the test again next year, so we will be waiting for your return.”

As the commander explained, a hazelnut-haired boy who seemed to be part of the Academy Knights passed out the test sheets, face-down. The lecture room had become so quiet you could hear a pin drop. The air was tense.

“You have sixty minutes. Begin!”

The written exam tested our knowledge of the school rules. For example:

Q2

List one or two acceptable punishments for a student who is late for morning class.

That was one of the easier questions.

Q13

Explain the objective of Article 21 of the Academy Regulations, The Duty to Suppress Monsters.

That was one of the difficult ones. Since the exact article number and name were provided, it wasn't nearly as bad as some of the nitpicky, malicious questions that sometimes appeared on Japanese entrance exams. Of course, it was more challenging for transfer students like me, who had only just entered the Academy.

Furthermore, the questions didn't just demand rote knowledge. Some also tested your responses to practical situations. For example:

Q18

Say you have taken over a position from your predecessor. Select the task that you should prioritize out of the following options:

1. Confirming the details of the job requirements
2. Brainstorming with your superior
3. Processing petitions from students
4. Notifications to outside parties

These kinds of questions didn't give students of any background an advantage. If anything, they could be slightly advantageous for transfer students, who tended to have more experience with chores and practical life skills.

Once again, though these were multiple choice questions in the game, I had to answer them in essay format now. I had them all memorized, so I was pretty sure I wouldn't be eliminated, though I didn't know if I could score higher than Claire. I was more worried about making careless mistakes, so I reviewed my responses carefully once I was done.

"Time's up. We will now collect the answer sheets."

I could finally relax. The students immediately began chattering about the questions and how difficult they had been.

"Please wait until we have your scores. A list of those who have passed will be posted on the bulletin board before the afternoon, so make sure to check for your outcome. The practical exam will take place this afternoon. You are excused."

The students scattered in groups of twos and threes.

"Miss Claire, how did it go?"

"Who do you think I am? I would never shame the François name by being eliminated."

"I expect nothing less, Miss Claire. But these are the sorts of tests where you often get sidetracked by tangents."

"I-I'm just fine. I would not…" She was looking around frantically.

"Are you okay, Miss Claire? Do you think you'll be able to eat lunch?"

"Don't worry about me! Forget about it. Let's go to the cafeteria!"

"Miss Claire, are you inviting me out for a meal? Is this a date? A school meal for our first date?"

"Why would I go on a date with a pathetic maid?!"

Lene joined us for a quick lunch; the practical test was that afternoon, so we didn't want to eat anything heavy enough to make us sluggish. By the time we arrived at the bulletin shortly before noon, it was surrounded by a crowd of people. It looked like the results had been posted.

"Excuuuse me. A François is coming throooough. Let us by, pleeease," I announced.

"Would you please not use my family's name in that way?!" Claire complained.

But the François name proved effective, and a path to the board opened for us like the Red Sea had parted for Moses. I bowed at the people that made way.

Written Test Results

1st Rod Bauer

2nd Yu Bauer

3rd Claire François

4th Rae Taylor

5th Misha Jur

6th Thane Bauer

-

-

-

In total, the list had the twenty names of those who would be permitted to take on the afternoon test.

Hmm, fourth place. Not too bad.

"Oh ho ho ho! Look at that, no peasant can beat me!" Claire laughed, looking cattily satisfied.

"It looks like you girls made it past the written test, too."

“That’s good.”

The three princes had also arrived to check the results. They had passed without difficulty, of course, though the lowest-scoring among them was Thane. I suspect that bothered him; he had that old grim expression on his face.

“If I’d just failed this round, I’d be off the hook,” Misha sighed.

“Oh, Misha, you passed, too.”

“Well, it wasn’t too bad.” Misha was acting nonchalant, but as a transfer student, fifth place was excellent, especially considering that I’d technically cheated to get my results. Although Misha *had* attended the Academy in kindergarten, her house had only fallen into ruin after.

“I don’t mind saying this, but anyone who couldn’t pass that test has no business being an Academy Knight,” declared Rod.

“That’s right. The questions were so basic,” Yu agreed.

Only Thane was silent. The princes (well, two of them) made it sound simple, but of the fifty students who took the exam, more than half had now been eliminated.

“Those who passed the written test will now take part in the practical. Gather on the athletic field!” Lorek announced to the remaining candidates.

“Let’s go, Miss Claire.”

“You will not give me orders, peasant.”

“Heh heh. I can’t wait.”

“Huh?”

Already knowing the details of the practical test, it was hard for me to keep from laughing. I was going to enjoy this.

***

“The practical exam will be conducted as a one-on-one mock battle,” Commander Lorek explained.

The students before him stirred, perhaps recalling the slime they had faced a few days ago. Mock or not, actually fighting another person took courage.

“Those who prove they have what it takes to join the Academy Knights will be accepted, irrespective of whether or not they win their bout. Likewise, simply winning your battle will not secure a pass.”

I didn’t know much about boxing, but I had heard boxing licenses were issued in a similar way. The loser of a match could be granted a license if they proved their skill, while knocking your opponent out with one hit might be considered a fluke and not count as a proven success.

“If there are no requests, I will assign your battle opponents based on the results of the test you took after starting at the Academy. Does anyone have an opponent they want to fight?”

“Yes. I want to fight Rae Taylor,” Claire called out in her typical manner.

“Are you sure, Miss Claire? The opponent you have chosen secured historical results on the magic portion of the test.”

“That’s fine.”

“Okay then. Rae, do you have any objections?”

“None.” I was so excited I couldn’t sit still.

“Anyone else?”

“Fine, I want to fight Misha. I wanted Rae, but Claire beat me to her,” said Rod, who had ranked ninth in the magic test. You might think he was taking on a hefty challenge with Misha, who had ranked second, but, well, you’ll see.

“Then may I request to fight Thane?” Yu asked.

“That’s fine…”

Yu was ranked ninth, the same as Rod. Thane was eighth, so that would no doubt be an exciting match.

Incidentally, it was too dangerous to hold even mock battles using actual magic without protection, so a special barrier was set up around the athletic field through use of an expensive magic tool. The tool was primarily used for protective purposes during war and was extremely rare; furthermore, only a few people could wield it.

"Now, let the first match begin. Competitors, take your places."

The mock battles proceeded solemnly. A number of nobles among the combatants had taken magic courses before secondary school, but that did nothing to improve their innate aptitude, so none of the matches were particularly spectacular. For fairness' sake, the only magical tool allowed was a magic wand.

Finally, it was time for Thane and Yu's battle.

"Competitors, are you ready?"

"Yeah…"

"Yes."

"Then on my mark… Begin!"

Thane stomped his foot at the signal to start, punching the air with his fist while simultaneously closing the gap between them. Yu generated an ice shield to block Thane's approach, but—

"Huh?!"

The ice shield shattered into pieces. Yu's dignified expression wavered.

Thane's fighting style was close combat, driven by his wind auxiliary magic, and it was dubbed the Magic Warrior style. He didn't wield weapons and could generate power with his bare hands.

Conversely, Yu's battle style was long-range, driven by his offensive water magic—though since his attribute was

water, he could also use recovery magic. More importantly, his nickname was the Prince of Ice, though his aptitude was only moderate, he was versed in ice magic. If his opponent had been anyone but Thane, his barrier could never have been broken with a bare fist.

We watched in silence as, still expressionless, Thane took another step forward and released a magic-fueled kick. Yu realized he was at a disadvantage in close combat and tried to put distance between them, but it was no easy feat to shake Thane, who boosted the speed and power of his movements with magic. Determining he couldn't dodge the kick, Yu quickly generated a barrier of water instead of ice.

"Ergh!"

Although the water barrier wasn't as solid and strong as ice, it softened Thane's kick. Yu fell back, freezing the ground as he retreated, making it harder for Thane to get closer.

"Heh… You're so impatient, Thane. I think I'll take my counterattack, now."

Thane didn't say a word. Yu lifted his hands, manifesting a number of razor-sharp ice arrows in midair.

"Go."

The ice arrow barrage rained down on Thane at his command.

"Master Thane!" called Claire, watching from the sidelines, as if she thought he was in genuine danger. Ahhh, a girl in love!

But—

"Eh?!"

The ice arrows bypassed Thane as he rushed forward, colliding into the ground behind him. He had surrounded his body with a wind barrier.

"But the ground!"

I knew what Claire was worried about. But Thane ran across the frozen ground with sure footing—in fact, he had

created a solid footpath out of wind. He closed in on Yu once more.

"Argh!" Yu's expression stiffened… But only for a moment. "Did you think you had me?"

Once Thane was a mere step away, icicle spikes burst from the ground under his feet. He may have dodged the airborne ice arrows, but a wind barrier couldn't hold back these, rooted in the ground.

"Hmph…"

Thane's strategy was to kick down the ice blades. He then kicked up shards of ice, obstructing Yu's vision and temporarily blinding him.

"Argh?!" Once the shards of ice had cleared and Yu could see again, there was no sign of Thane.

"Over here."

He was in the air, directly above Yu. Thane dropped down behind him and held his sword to his brother's neck.

Yu smirked. "You win."

"That's it! The winner is Master Thane!"

The match had been on an entirely different level from the others that had taken place so far, and the spectators roared with approval. Claire's cheeks were flushed, and she looked like she was wiped out.

"You're strong when you put your mind to it, Brother," Yu said.

"You weren't even trying though, right? And it's like you're saving your healing magic for a special occasion, come on."

I listened to the princes bantering after their match. They were so cool. I mean, you'd expect as much from the game's love interests. Many players decided to take Thane's route after seeing this battle and then regretted it later. Though, in my opinion, Thane had a ton of great qualities.

I was sure they would both be asked to join the Knights after that battle. Well, I already knew what the results were going to be…but it was something else to see people actually using magic as they moved about.

Hurrah for this fantastical world!

***

"The Ninth Match is Master Rod and Misha. Take your places."

Rod, lordly as always, and Misha, cool and composed, walked out to the center of the athletic field.

"Competitors, are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Ready when you are."

"Then on my mark… Begin!"

Rod moved at once. He took several large steps back and spread his arms wide toward the sky.

"Bring it!" As his voice echoed through the air, the temperature of the athletic field increased a few sharp degrees. Fire spread across the field at about knee-height. Upon closer inspection, the flames were shaped like small soldiers, about thirty in number.

This was Rod's battle style, called The Flame Troops. As I mentioned before, he had a medium aptitude for fire magic, which wasn't very high. However, Rod had an abundance of magical power, and he utilized that power to create a small army of flames to fight for him.

"Charge!" At Rod's command, the army of flames rushed Misha.

Her expression remained unchanged, even though this was the first time she'd seen Rod's Flame Troops. Misha had the same high-aptitude wind magic attribute as Thane—but

there was a reason why'd she'd ranked second in the magic test and Thane had ranked eighth.

"Eeeeeeek!"

A high-pitched sound, like nails on a chalkboard, resounded across the field. At the same time, every single one of Rod's thirty fire minions exploded. Misha didn't move.

"Huh?!" Rod, who'd gone into the match full of confidence, couldn't help but lose his composure. However, he faltered only for a moment and called up a fresh batch of minions. "Charge!"

The exact same thing happened again, as if we were watching a GIF loop. There was the strange sound again, and once it stopped, all the minions were gone. Misha had crushed the army of flames.

"So this is your wind magic."

"Indeed."

Unlike Thane, Misha's wind magic was a rare offensive sub-type. She used magic to attack through sound, which had earned her the nickname Siren.

"This is annoying, isn't it? Well, I'm not going to change what I'm doing." Rod summoned his army for a third time. "Charge!"

The army charged again. This was the annoying thing about Rod's magic; he had so much power that he could just keep making more minions, no matter how many times Misha struck them down. Furthermore, Misha couldn't get close to him with the army in the way.

There was another reason she was sticking to defensive tactics. Unlike me, Misha had absolute respect for the royal family. I was sure she would rather fail the exam than take the initiative to attack Rod.

"This is boring…" Rod snorted after his minions had been eliminated for the third time. "You're not fighting seriously, are you? Are you trying to go easy on me?"

“My blade is not worthy to be pointed at the royal family.”

“That attitude is far more disrespectful to me than any blade…”

“No matter what you say, this I cannot change.”

“In that case, I’ll force you to fight me for real.” Rod created thirty minions again, but this time, the soldiers surrounded Misha. “You really won’t stop holding back? Well, I’ll make you’ll regret that.”

He snapped his fingers, and the minions started to explode one by one, setting off a chain reaction that engulfed Misha. Rod laughed arrogantly, but then—

“You’re…unscathed?”

The flames dispersed, and there was Misha, smoke swirling around her.

“A wind barrier? But…that shouldn’t be enough to block out heat.”

“I used a vacuum rupture.”

“Eh?!”

The same principle as a thermos, in other words. By creating a vacuum fault line in the space around her, Misha had been able to shut out the heat.

“Heh… Interesting. I wasn’t expecting that. You certainly aren’t boring.”

“Thank you very much.”

“But we’re not done yet. We’ve only just begun.”

“Take as long as you need.”

For the fifth time, Rod summoned his flame soldiers. He really had an incomparable reservoir of magic. Just as before, the minions surrounded Misha, keeping a certain distance from her. But this time—

“Explode.”

The minions burst in a chain of explosions as soon as Rod snapped his fingers. He then summoned more minions directly around Misha, instead of in front of himself, continuing the series of detonations without a break. There were so many explosions that the wave of heat even reached the spectators.

Rod was childish, but I did admire him a bit for not pulling his punches even though his opponent was a girl.

"I surrender," said a meek voice among the explosions.

"That's it?!"

Lorek hurried to halt the match. Rod stopped snapping his fingers, and the sounds of explosions subsided.

"What happened? Why did Misha surrender?"

"Probably lack of oxygen," I explained to Claire, whose confused look represented what all the spectators felt. Misha's vacuum rupture created a severe lack of oxygen, and Rod's flames burned up the rest. In the end, the sheer force of his power had squashed Misha's technique.

"Well, that sounds about right," said Rod.

"I was completely defeated," Misha sighed.

"Don't be stupid. If you hadn't waited it out, it wouldn't have ended that way."

"I did my very best."

Rod and Misha walked back to the spectator area, the crowd parting naturally for them. When you thought about it, the two of them could have taken down the water slime easily —if not for the Hateful Cry, which could immobilize opponents and drastically change the tides of battle. Meanwhile, Mr. Torrid and I had kept it at bay by nothing but sheer luck.

"Well, next up, the title match. This should be even more interesting."

"Please, Master Rod. Stop making me nervous," Claire said.

“But you don’t plan on losing, right?”

“Of course I don’t.”

“I’m rooting for you. And Rae, too,” Rod told us with a charming smile.

“Heh…”

“Rae, stop being disrespectful,” Misha chided me for my casual reply. I didn’t really care, because next was—

“Match 10, Miss Claire vs. Rae.”

—my turn with Claire.

***

“Oh ho ho! I’ll give you what you deserve,” Claire cackled.

“No, c’mon. Let’s have some fun,” I responded with a smile.

“Fun? I don’t believe a commoner can take me down.”

“Heh heh. Do your best.”

Claire was so easily provoked. She was going to give me a cuteness-induced heart attack.

“Competitors, are you ready?”

“I’m good.”

“Yes.”

“Then let the final match…begin!”

Neither Claire nor I acted on the signal to start. We were both waiting for the other to make the first move. Given her personality, I’d thought for sure Claire would go first, but she looked pretty calm.

And me? I was biding my time because I wanted to play with her for as long as possible.

“Aren’t you going to come at me?”

“I was going to ask you the same.”

“I have plenty of time.”

“Oh, is that so?”

A wave of silence fell over the crowd.

“You really aren’t going to make a move? Then there will be no battle.”

“No. I’m just happy gazing upon you, Miss Claire.”

“Are you trying to bait me?!” Claire ground her heel in frustration.

“Well, I can start it off, if you insist.” It had to be done. I raised one arm in Claire’s direction. “Shut.”

Claire disappeared into a shell of rock that suddenly burst from the ground. I had confined her through use of an earth attribute barrier, but the rock was soon shattered from within as Claire popped out in a cloud of dust.

“Hmph. Is that all you’ve got?” The rock had melted into sludge. No matter how weak the earth attribute was against fire, the melting point of rock was at least 700 degrees Celsius and could be as high as 1,200 degrees. Claire’s magical fire power had to be extremely high to be able to melt rock so fast.

“Just more teasing.” I created a number of small stone arrows to send toward Claire.

“Useless!”

The stone arrows were completely blocked by the flame barrier she conjured. A fire barrier without solid components didn’t provide much protection, but Claire could make one hot enough to dissolve stone in an instant. Her fighting style was standard for magic wielders, an all-purpose approach in which she controlled fire at will, favoring neither defense nor offense. For her skills, she was known as the Red Lotus Queen.

“I’m coming for you this time.” Claire deftly raised her hands, summoning the same massive flame spear she’d used against the water slime. It was shaped like a lance used by medieval knights on horseback.

“That’s great, Miss Claire! You have superb instincts and unparalleled skill at controlling your flames!”

“Shut up!” Claire let out a cough. “Disappear!”

She launched the flame spear. I responded by creating an earth magic barrier.

“Fool! Did you forget how I just melted your magic?!” Claire laughed, sure of her victory, but then… “It’s not melting?! Why?!”

Earth barriers in this world were often built of stone, but I had devised a tungsten carbide barrier. Tungsten carbide was twice as strong as steel, and its melting point was actually 28,800 degrees Celsius. Even Claire couldn’t melt this wall.

I admit it: science wasn’t advanced enough in this world to people to know about tungsten carbide. I was cheating—just a bit—by drawing on modern Japanese knowledge.

“So even a pathetic peasant can have sufficient aptitude. But how long can you keep it up?”

Claire generated another massive flame spear and launched it. It passed me, missing by a long shot.

“Turn!”

The flame spear turned sharply and hurtled toward me from behind. I raised a tungsten carbide barrier behind me as well.

“Burst!” Just before the spear hit the barrier, Claire snapped her fingers. The mass of flames turned into a shower of small bullets that whipped around the barrier. “I win!”

She kept saying such ominous things. But—

“Oh, so close.”

I repelled the flame bullets with tungsten carbide bullets that I’d created with a flick of my wrist.

“Whoa, that was fast,” I heard Rod sputter. Well, I was kind of cheating even more, because I also knew all of Claire’s tactics. No matter how much she tried to surprise me, I could tell what she was going to do next.

“Argh… You’re just a peasant…”

“Huh? What happened? Are we done?”

“No way,” Claire magicked up a small army of fire bombs. “Master Rod, thank you.”

“Huh?”

The fire bombs careened toward me, but I held them at bay with a barrier.

“It’s not over yet!” Claire kept hurling fire bombs nonstop, each exploding one after another against my barrier.

“I see,” Yu said, finally understanding what was going on. Claire was copying Rod’s Flame Troops. Claire had high aptitude, though not the sheer magical capacity that Rod had, so she couldn’t completely copy him, but temporary replication was within her abilities. She was aiming to use up my oxygen like Rod had with Misha.

“Okay then, how about this?” I moved my barrier outward, pushing back the fire bombs and securing space and oxygen. Then I expanded the barrier even farther and tried to use it to capture Claire.

“That’s not going to work, you know?” Claire was quick on her feet and dodged the barrier. Even without a wind magic boost, she was impressively strong for a young lady, having been trained in not only literature but martial arts.

Rod and Misha analyzed the match like commentators. “It’s not quite as exciting as our battle, but this match is incredibly impressive on a technical level.”

“Yes, you’re absolutely right.”

“Okay, Miss Claire. What are you going to show me next?”

“The insolence,” Claire stretched her arms out to her sides.

Four glowing crests appeared in the air and floated around her—the crest of the François family.

“I can’t believe I’m using this on a commoner… Shine!”

As Claire spoke, heat rays lanced out of the four crests. I rushed to throw up a barrier but didn’t make it in time.

“This is a warning,” Claire said as the heat rays flew past, searing the ground around me—actually, vaporizing it. This was her trump card, an ultra-high-powered beam weapon called the Magic Ray. It launched so fast that it was almost impossible to track its path with the naked eye. “I can only shoot it a limited number of times, but do you realize my power, now? You won’t survive a direct attack unscathed. Surrender.”

“Well, you’re right. But…”

“But?”

“Surrendering would suck, so I’m going to win.” I snapped my fingers. The soil under Claire’s feet disappeared.

“Aaagh!” Claire let out an adorable scream as she fell, unable to do anything. I continued hollowing out the earth beneath her, digging a pit about sixty feet deep. “Hey! Stop it! Stop it with that simple magic!”

“But it’s effective, right?”

Unless your opponent could move through the air like Thane, this pitfall was surprisingly effective. You couldn’t build a scaffold with fire attributes, and if the shaft was narrow, vertical flame propulsion could collapse the walls in on you. Someone with a water attribute could float up slowly, but it’d be hard to rise faster than your opponent could deepen the hole.

“I will not accept this outcome!”

“Then escape.”

“Wait! Use your magic to make the hole wider!”

“Claire…give up,” Thane, who had been silent so far, finally said.

“What are you saying, Master Thane?! I’m not done yet.”

“You haven’t noticed…? Rae still hasn’t used her water magic, which is most effective against your fire.”

I heard Clare gasp. Thane was right. The fire attribute was terribly weak against water, so I could have dominated Claire from the beginning if I’d wanted. But that wouldn’t have been any fun, now would it?

“You…were going easy on me?”

“Yes!”

“Argh! You’re making a fool of me!”

“So, Miss Claire, do you want to keep going?”

“Of course I do!” Claire wasn’t giving up. She set about removing the soil around her with spells and fire magic, trying to escape by widening the pitfall into a basin.

“Miss Claire, keep going!” I encouraged.

“You really are insufferable!”

My task was simple: all I had to do was keep replenishing whatever soil Claire had removed.

“Argh!”

“Miss Claire, I’m very sorry, but I’m going to call this match,” said Lorek. “The winner is Rae. Good work, ladies.”

And just like that, the curtain came down on the mock battle between Claire and myself. I brought Claire up to ground level.

“I hope you know that I don’t accept this result!” Claire was furious and covered in dirt, but I found that unutterably lovely, too. I wasn’t shallow enough to only want her when she was beautiful.

In the end, six students passed the Academy Knights Exam, not five, and they were the ones who had participated in the last three battles: Rod, Thane, Yu, Claire, Misha, and I. We received the crests proving we were Academy Knights and that marked the end of the selection test.

But I still had business to take care of.

“Misssss Claaaaaire!”

“I know, I know. What do you want this time?”

I had won our wager again. I already knew what my request would be.

“My favor is the same as before.”

“Huh?”

“Whatever happens, please don’t give up.”

“Hey, what is this about? I already promised that last time.”

“It’s fine. The same thing. Please promise me again.”

“Okay, but… That’s really all you want?”

“Yes.”

“Fine then… I, Claire François, swear to God to never give up. I promise never to abandon hope and to keep going until the end.”

“That’s great.” This was truly the end of all our competition. “Miss Claire, I’m hungry. Let’s go to the cafeteria.”

“You’re shameless! After beating me in such a pathetic way.”

“Thank you so much! I did my best!”

“I’m not praising you!”

And just like that, we were back to our usual bickering.

“Please never change, Miss Claire,” I said.

“Huh? What prompted this?”

“It’s nothing. Let’s go, Miss Claire.”

“Hey! Don’t just touch me whenever you want, peasant!”

Claire didn’t need to know what was coming. It would happen eventually, no matter what we tried to do.

***

The Academy Knights sounded cool, but the truth was that, much like a high-school student council in present-day Japan, they had a bunch of work to do. We had to deal with every little complaint submitted by the student body.

Starting with this one: it seemed there were multiple reports of ghost sightings in the girls’ dormitory at night. Claire complained about being paired with me to investigate the matter, but I was her maid, so it was a moot point. Today, we were questioning witnesses, one by one. I didn’t remember this event occurring in the game, so I was super curious to find out what was going on.

“Where did you see it?” I asked the girl student we were talking to.

“My friend said she saw it between the second and third floors, but I saw it in the kitchen.”

I scribbled down a note. “And what did it look like?”

“Well…I didn’t realize it was a ghost at first. I just thought it looked strange, but then it got closer, and it splashed water on me.”

“W-water?”

“Yes. It might be the ghost of the girl who drowned in the Academy’s river.”

“Er.” Claire took a deep breath.

“What’s wrong, Miss Claire?”

“I-It’s nothing.”

It was clear something *was* wrong, but I didn't push further. "Thank you for your information," I told the witness.

"Please get rid of it!"

As the girl left, I turned to Claire. "Let's go check out the scene of the sighting next."

"Don't you mean *you'll* go check it out?"

"What are you talking about? Two sets of eyes are better than one."

"Y-yes, that's true…"

I started off toward the kitchen, and Claire reluctantly came with me.

As is probably obvious by now, Claire didn't care for ghosts. There was an annual summer event called the Undead Hunt in the game, and Claire was always so charming during it, being all genuinely afraid of the ghosts. As we went about processing these spooky complaints, she quivered in fear and I danced for joy.

"Here we are."

"Oh dear, it's locked. How unfortunate. I suppose we'll have to come back."

"I borrowed the key."

"O-oh…"

I opened the old-fashioned cylinder lock, letting us into the kitchens. Various cooking utensils were neatly tucked away in their respective places. A subtle, sweet scent hung in the air. Maybe someone was baking? The three main meals of the day were served in the cafeteria, so the dormitory kitchen was mainly used by the maids of noble students baking for their employers or transfer students making themselves a snack.

"Miss Claire, please look around the entrance. I'll look in the back."

"You will not give me orders!"

“Okay then, do you want to look in the back?”

“It’s fine… I’ll let you do it.”

We investigated the premises separately for some time, and then—

“Ah?! Peasant! You! Rae!”

“What is it?”

“Ah… Um… Why are you giggling?”

“Oh, sorry. You’re just so precious.”

“This is no time to play the fool! Stop that and look over there!”

I looked where Claire was pointing; she had found a gel-like substance spilled on the floor.

“What is it…?” I got closer to try and take a sample.

“Don’t touch it! What if something happens?!”

“What? Are you worried about me?”

“I don’t want to get caught up in any trouble you invite!”

“Okay, fine. Let’s leave it for the research department.”

The Academy was an academic institution, yes, but it was also a state-of-the-art research facility with a setup similar to modern-day Japanese universities. The research department used to specialize in natural history, but since the discovery of magical stones, it had switched over to analyzing magical phenomena. Some of the researchers also specialized in the study of monsters.

“It looks like this is the only clue here.”

“Then let’s hurry up and go.”

“Yes, you’re right. Let’s come back tonight,” I said.

“What?!” Claire looked like she couldn’t believe what she was hearing.

“Once night comes, we might be able to see the apparitions ourselves.”

“B-but. What will we do if a ghost really does show up?”

“Then we’ll just catch it, won’t we?” I teased the petrified Claire.

“I-Isn’t that the army’s job?”

“Unless it’s a bona fide undead, the Academy Knights are strong enough to take care of a ghost.”

“Th-that may be true, but we did find that gel-stuff, and…”

“Fear not. I will protect you.”

“Don’t treat me like I’m stupid! I am perfectly capable of protecting myself!”

“Okay then. We’ll come back tonight.”

“Ahhh… Why do you look like you’re enjoying this so much?”

Once midnight came around, Claire and I returned to the kitchen together. We unlocked the door and crept inside.

“There’s nothing here…”

“It certainly looks that way.”

“See, the ghost-sightings were just mistakes.”

“Just in case, let’s keep watch tonight.”

“Here?!” Claire looked at me like I was crazy.

“It’s fine. I told Lene what we were up to, and she prepared bedding for us.”

She had left a pair of futons folded in the corner of the kitchen. Leaving Claire to panic alone, I began laying out one of them.

“Okay, sleepy time.”

“You’ve only laid out one futon! There are two! Put them both out!”

“Huh? But then I won’t be able to sleep on the same futon as you, Miss Claire.”

“That’s fine by me!”

“You’re so selfish.”

“Me?! What have I said wrong?!”

Alas. There was nothing I could do but give in and lay out both futons.

“Miss Claire, please lie down first,” I said.

“And what are you going to do?”

“I thought I would make a midnight snack.” I had permission to use the kitchen, after all. I started pulling ingredients from the drawers and cabinets, and measuring out portions.

“So…you can cook, too?”

“Of course. I’m a peasant.”

“Oh…that’s true.”

“But lately, I’ve been trying new recipes. It’s actually pretty fun.”

“Well, that makes sense. It’s a very peasant-like pastime.” Claire sounded like her normal self again, since nothing spooky was happening. “But you’re always right by my side. When do you have time to cook?”

“I do it in the middle of the night, when no one is looking.”

“Oh, is that…so…” Claire stopped short. “In the middle of the night… In the kitchen?”

“Yes.”

“Does that mean… You are the kitchen ghost?”

“Yes! I think it’s me!”

“I’m going back to my room!” Claire rolled off her futon and started to leave—only to find her path blocked by a blue object. “Agh! There it is!”

“Look again, Miss Claire. Say ‘hi,’ Ralaire.”

“Huh?”

Ralaire was quivering, trying to look cute. I couldn’t keep an eye on her when I was cooking, so I let her out of my bag to roam freely.

“And that gel-like substance?”

“Yes, I think that was likely from Ralaire.”

“You and your pet really are a nuisance,” Claire moaned with a frustrated expression.

“I *am* sorry for not telling you. Please accept this as my apology.” I held out the dish I made.

“What is this?”

“It’s a kind of baked good. I hope you like it.”

“What are you talking about? That you would think I would like anything less than Broumet—” Claire said, but she did take a bite for me. Well, maybe she was just planning to taste it and then spit it out. “Huh?! It’s delicious! What is this? It’s like cake but thick and creamy inside…”

“It’s called fondant au chocolat. It’s chocolate cake with warm, melted chocolate inside.”

“Chocolate is a novel new ingredient that even Broumet has only recently acquired. How do you know how to cook with it…? Who are you?” Claire looked at me suspiciously, narrowing her blue eyes.

“Why, I am nothing but a slave to your love, Miss Claire.”

“Stop trying to trick me!”

“Come now. This dish isn’t very good once it cools down, so please finish eating it quickly. I’ll make some tea.”

“Ugh… Still, this cake is divine. I offer my compliments.”

“Thank you very much.”

Once Claire and I were done with our special little tea party, we got to talking. In the end, we wound up sleeping in the kitchen, after all. *The overnight date was a great success,* I rejoiced to myself as I watched Claire sleep.

"Shut up…" she mumbled.

Even in sleep, her face was angelic.

***

"Foundation Day Fair…?"

"That's right," Commander Lorek answered.

I was with the other Academy Knights in an office about the size of an elementary school classroom in Japan. It was furnished with desks and chairs, and the bookcase on the wall was lined with documents and manuals. Lorek sat in the commander's chair, which wasn't adorned in any specific way or positioned higher than others. However, Rod and the other princes sat in raised seats—one of the telltale signs that this was a school for aristocrats.

I was, of course, sitting next to Claire. And, of course, she wasn't too pleased about it.

I remembered the Foundation Day Festival from *Revolution*. The event, which commemorated the founding day of the Royal Academy, was like the school festivals held at schools in Japan. Each class prepared something to show off, and outside guests were welcome to visit. It was so similar to Japanese school festivals, in fact, that it made it clear the game was created by a Japanese production company.

"We should be quite busy making preparations for the fair—approving class requests for goods, loaning out equipment, and such. Each of you will be assigned certain tasks, so if there's something you don't understand, please ask," Lorek said.

"Commander, the Academy Knights are going to prepare something for the fair too, right?" Rod asked once all

the duties had been delegated.

"Yes. Normally the Knights set up a café."

"That's boring. Let's do something more unique," Rod said. He really couldn't tolerate boredom.

"What do you have in mind, Rod?" Yu sounded interested.

"I think normal is better." Thane clearly didn't want to take on too much.

"Cross-dressing cafés have become pretty popular in the capital lately. What do you think? We could do that."

"What is a cross-dressing café?" Misha balked at the term.

"It's simple. The waitstaff boys dress as girls, and the girls dress as boys. It's just switching clothes but still more interesting than normal, right?" Rod smiled, his eyes shining.

"What do we think…? Master Rod, that means you'll have to dress as a girl, you know? Is that…allowed of royalty?" Claire wondered.

"We just have to make sure we don't get caught," Rod said, laughing.

"Setting aside girls dressing as boys, I don't know if I want to see boys dress as girls… Then again…maybe it could work."

Claire seemed to change her mind as she took a long look at the princes. Personalities aside, all three boys were beautiful. They would probably look pretty good in women's clothing.

"Don't forget that we'd have to be part of the operation, too… Right, Lambert?" Commander Lorek turned somberly to the man next to him, but as he did, his face suddenly grew stern. Lambert, a beautiful young man with hazelnut-colored hair and eyes, had been the one handing out the answer sheets during the Academy Knights written test. As Commander Lorek had no doubt just realized, he would look great in women's clothing, too.

Lambert Aurousseau, first-born son of the Aurousseau Company and Lene's older brother. Lene worked under Claire as a maid, while Lambert had entered the Academy as a scholarship student. He was skilled at magic and had achieved a certain amount of fame for his work researching and developing magic tools. He also currently served as deputy commander of the Academy Knights. Considering his achievements, he could have made it to commander if his family had been nobility.

"Oh, I see… So the only laughingstock will be me," Lorek held his head in his hands.

"So, no objections?" Rod ignored Lorek.

"It's fine by me," Yu agreed.

"If that's what everyone wants, then…" Thane passively agreed.

"I have no objections," Misha said.

"It's fine with m—" Claire began.

"Miss Claire will wear men's clothing… That will be precious…" I said.

"I changed my mind. One vote against," Claire snapped.

"I also object…"

"Give it up, Commander."

Lorek's modest attempt to rescue his dignity ended with Lambert consoling him.

"It's decided, then. This year, the Academy Knights will host a cross-dressing café called Cavalier."

"Cavalier?"

"It's the official name of the Academy Knights. 'Cavalier' means knight," Lambert went on to explain that the term was rarely used anymore because it sounded pretentious. It reminded me that, back in my school days, my liberal arts teacher had taught us the difference between the words.

“If I remember correctly,” I said, “doesn’t ‘cavalier’ have the nuance of maintaining elegance, while also showing a lack of concern?”

“That’s correct. But I prefer to preserve an air of elegance, if possible, even when showing a lack of concern,” Lambert chuckled.

Moving on.

“So, Miss Claire, you are a lady of the cavaliers. That almost sounds like a lady of the cabaret!”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, but I don’t think you’re complimenting me.”

“Of course I’m complimenting you! I would come watch you every day!”

“What are you talking about?”

There were no cabarets in this world. There was probably something similar, though.

“Miss Claire, let’s put your hair up!”

“What do you mean, put my hair up?”

“A special hairstyle that only cabaret performers wear!”

“Special… Hmph! Whatever. You can do anything, as long as it’s special.” She could be a little simple, my dear lady.

After the meeting, we ate dinner and adjourned to Claire’s room.

“What are you doing, Rae?”

“I want to turn Miss Claire into a cabaret dancer.”

“Huh?”

“Okay, Miss Claire. I’m going to begin.” I proceeded to work on arranging Claire’s hair into an updo. Luckily, I had a ton of hairpins at my disposal.

“So this is what it looks like?”

“Mm-hmm. You make a foundation with half of the hair in back and hold it in place with pins.”

Lene seemed really interested in the hairstyle and enthusiastically asked questions. I wasn't an expert, but I excitedly taught her what I knew. The hardest part was getting the pins in right.

"At least Miss Claire's hair is already curled nicely. It's the curling that takes up the most time."

"Lene took care of that."

"Much obliged."

After a few more minutes, it was done.

"Wow! Miss Claire, it looks wonderful."

"It does look pretty good." Claire seemed satisfied, checking her reflection from the front and on both sides.

"It's great, Miss Claire! You look exactly like a cabaret performer!"

"I-I do?" Claire looked proud. She'd definitely be mad if I told her what it really meant.

"Miss Claire, do you want to keep this hairstyle for a bit?" Lene asked casually.

Claire, who had been delighted up to that point, lowered her voice, "No… My normal hairstyle is fine. Can you fix it, Lene?"

"Oh, is that so? Yes, Miss," Lene answered in her usual soft voice, not making it clear whether she had or hadn't noticed the change in Claire's demeanor.

Claire's corkscrew curls were an imitation of her deceased mother, who had always worn her hair that way. One might say she had mommy issues.

"I love that about you, too!"

"What are you going on about?"

"Sorry, my love was just overflowing a bit."

"That's enough… You go back to your room."

But there was one more thing I had to say.

“I can’t wait to see you dressed in men’s clothing!”

“Hurry up and go to bed!”

***

“Hmmm…”

“What is it, Lene?”

The three first-year Academy Knights—Claire, Misha, and myself—were in the dormitory kitchen with Lene, coming up with recipes for the cross-dressing café. The boys weren’t with us, not because they thought women were inferior or anything, but because the princes had never cooked a day in their princely little lives, making them useless for this project. I personally thought they should at least stop by, though.

“This flavor…I think I’ve tasted it before.”

“Really? Well, I think she makes pretty good food for a commoner.”

Since we wanted something simple, I’d started by making some sandwiches, which were easy to iterate on. I began with a standard egg salad sandwich, which was what Lene was contemplating.

“Have I cooked for you before, Lene?”

“No, I don’t think so. But the sauce on this sandwich reminds me of something I’ve had before.”

Oh no.

“Oh, this must be mayonnaise,” Claire said smugly.

“You know what this is, Miss Claire?” Misha asked her.

“It’s the new sauce they announced at Broumet. It has a nice mellow taste with a moderate acidity.”

“Why would Rae know how to make something like that?” Lene peered at me, mystified.

I had been careless. I made the egg salad just like I always had in my previous life without giving it a second thought.

“Er, umm. I think I just happened to make something similar.”

“Really?”

“Yes, yes,” I desperately tried to convince them.

Sharper readers might have suspected by now that it was I who gave the chocolate and mayonnaise recipes to Broumet. While the plan to make a fortune from conditioner hadn’t enticed me, I had still been transported to a medieval-Europe-inspired world that lacked what I considered basic amenities. The salary I got as Claire’s maid was by no means meager, but the profits of selling a recipe to a fine-dining restaurant, where the price of a full-course meal was half a year’s salary for a commoner, was far more than I could make working any other job.

I was trying to save money in preparation for the future. If I was here to stay in the game world, the best-case scenario was that Claire would go bankrupt, and the worst-case scenario was that she would be executed. I had to prevent that either way, and so I needed money. Money that Claire couldn’t know about.

“Next, we have sandwiches with a bunch of different fixings.”

To cover for my mistake, I moved on to the roast beef sandwich. I’d added thinly sliced vegetables and basil sauce on top, as well as a bit of spice.

“This is delicious. The egg sandwich was nice and simple, but this tastes much fancier.”

“You’re doing good work for a commoner.”

“Thank you very much.”

Both Misha and Claire enjoyed it. I had them try ham sandwiches and vegetable sandwiches, too, and they seemed to like all of them. But Lene appeared to be thinking hard.

“What is it, Lene?”

“Rae, can I speak to you for a minute?”

We stepped out of the kitchen together.

“The new recipes at Broumet are coming from you, aren’t they, Rae?”

Uh oh. This was a problem.

“What? Of course not. I told you. The mayonnaise was just a coincidence.”

“That’s not all. Everything you make is extraordinarily similar to the dishes Broumet serves.” Lene wasn’t giving up. Unlike me, Claire had bought her Broumet dishes to taste before.

“You’re imagining it.”

“You used something that gave it a little kick, didn’t you? That was pepper from the Eastern country, wasn’t it? Miss Claire mentioned it before.”

“Well, I heard about it from Miss Claire, too,”

I was sticking to my story. But Lene didn’t give up.

“It was the same for both the egg and vegetable sandwiches. The way you crush the eggs is so precise, but the way you cut the vegetables is not.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“The things you spend time on and the things you rush through are the same as in the Broumet recipes.”

I was starting to get nervous. I had given the restaurant advice on its existing recipes, too, but most people wouldn’t notice such details. Why was Lene suddenly going all Iron Chef Morimoto on me?

“Then how about the way you cooked the roast beef? The meat is customarily cooked all the way through, but you made the roast beef rare, right?”

Phew, at least that wasn’t true. “That wasn’t rare. It’s called pink. When it’s freshly cooked, it’s a light pink, but as

time passes, the hemoglobin changes the color of the meat."

"See, this is what I'm talking about. Ordinary people simply do not have such knowledge."

"Oh…" I'd been overconfident and fallen into the trap she set for me. Lene was shrewd.

"Why must you hide it?" she asked. "I think providing recipes to Broumet is amazing."

After such an intense interrogation, it was a relief to hear her say that. Maybe I could tell Lene my plans? They wouldn't come to fruition till far in the future, anyway.

"I admit it. I've been giving Broumet recipes."

"I knew it!"

"But please keep it a secret."

"Why?" Lene cocked her head to one side, puzzled.

"I can't tell you more, but it's for Miss Claire."

"For Miss Claire?"

"Mm-hmm. Please don't tell anyone."

"That's fine, but…" Her face made it clear she didn't understand my reasons for secrecy.

"I have secrets, just like you do," I said.

"Wh-what are you talking about?!"

"I wonder?" I mused. My expression was serious, so Lene would know I was warning her, but I think she understood I had no intention of letting her cat out of the bag, either.

"Fine. I'll keep quiet." Her face softened.

"Thank you," I said.

"In return, teach me some recipes. I want to make them for Miss Claire."

"Hm, okay. Do you have any requests?"

"Hmmm. I want to make sweets."

Were sweets really that much of a delicacy? “Then come back to the kitchen tonight. I’ll teach you a recipe.”

“Thank you. I’ll ask for permission to use it.”

Right, Lene was a maid, not an Academy student. She wasn’t allowed in the dormitory after curfew unless she was with Claire or got permission to enter on her own.

“Heh heh. I can’t wait.”

“Hey, you two. What are you talking about behind your boss’s back?” Claire came out of the kitchen, either impatient or worried about us.

“We’re having a secret discussion. Right, Rae?”

“That’s right.”

“You are *not* funny.” Claire had too much pride to come out and say she didn’t want to be left out.

“Okay, Lene. See you tonight.”

“Yes.”

***

“Why are you here, Miss Claire?”

“She insisted on coming, no matter what I said.” Lene had showed up at the promised time, Claire in tow.

“Are you going to make something? I’ll taste it for you,” Claire said, dressed in her pajamas and fighting back a yawn. She was obsessed with getting her beauty sleep and would normally be in bed by this hour.

“Hey, Lene. I thought we were supposed to keep this a secret from Miss Claire.”

“I’m sorry. I couldn’t fool her.”

We had stolen away from Claire and were whispering. Well…as long as Claire didn’t find out I was working for Broumet.

“Miss Claire, will you be able to stay awake?”

“I’m not a child. I can stay up as late as I want.”

“Okay then. You take this chair, Miss Claire.” I took off my jacket and draped it over Claire’s lap.

“Huh?”

“It may be spring, but the nights are chilly.”

“Hmm…” Claire turned her head as if she were uninterested, but she probably *was* cold, because she left the jacket on her lap.

“Now then, Lene, let’s start.”

“Yes.”

“Tonight, we’re making crème brûlée. Lene, you can make pudding, right?”

“I can.”

There wouldn’t be too much to teach her, then. “First, put milk and cream into a small pot. Add the vanilla beans, turn on the heat, and bring it to a boil. The vanilla beans can be left whole or chopped a bit.”

“So you use not only milk but fresh cream as well?”

“Mm-hmm.” The fact that she’d noticed these differences so quickly was testament to her long years of service as a maid.

“In a separate bowl, beat the egg yolks and sugar until it foams. Add this to the pot with the cream and mix well, then pour it into another bowl, straining it through a colander. Next, put the bowl over ice and mix while cooling the mixture.” I checked to make sure Lene was keeping up and confirmed she

was following my instructions while taking notes. As an aside, paper was a valuable commodity in this world. That was how dedicated Lene was to learning the recipe.

"Pour into ramekins and then bake in an oven preheated at 100 degrees Celsius for seventy minutes. Jiggle the brûlée, and if the center is just trembling, it's done. Let them cool, in the refrigerator if possible."

"The ingredients are slightly different, but it really is just pudding, right?"

"Lene, we haven't reached the important part yet. Watch carefully."

The last step was to toast the colorful top of the crème brûlée, but I wouldn't find any convenient culinary blowtorches at this time in history. I could use the magical oven, but there was a better method. I fetched some sugar and liquor.

"Just before serving, sprinkle sugar over the top and add a little liquor. The liquor should be as high proof as possible."

I took out a match, lit it, and moved it closer to the brûlée. It caught fire.

"I-It's on fire!"

"Relax, Miss Claire. This is a cooking technique called flambé," I said in a flurry. For someone with the fire magic attribute, she was pretty sensitive to fire. Or maybe it was because, as a wielder of fire, she was all too aware of its power.

"It turns out best if you let it cool and repeat the process. Then let it cool again, and it's ready."

I presented Claire with one of the ramekins.

"Now, Miss Claire. How about a taste? Lene, you try it, too."

"Thanks…"

"Thank you." Claire hesitantly reached out with her spoon. Then the spoon flew back. "It's hard."

“It’s been caramelized. Break it open with your spoon and eat it with the cream.”

Claire carefully tapped the top with her spoon, and the caramel surface broke easily. She scooped the crème up with her spoon and tentatively put it in her mouth.

“This—”

“It’s delicious! It’s really good, Rae!”

“Oh, I’m glad,” I took a bite myself. It *was* pretty good.

“It’s richer and moister than normal pudding. The crunchy part on top is amazing, too.”

“This crispy top is delectable. The last part… Flambé? That was so eye-catching, and fun, too!”

“You could use your fire magic to toast the top, Miss Claire.”

“I can’t imagine myself ever making this. I’ll leave the cooking to you, Lene.”

“Lene, did you get everything?”

“Yes, I think so. Thanks, Rae.”

“You’re welcome. You can have this, too.”

She looked puzzled as I handed her a folded piece of paper. When she looked at what was written on it, her expression went from puzzled to surprised.

“This is mayonnaise!”

“Shhh. Don’t let Miss Claire hear you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Mm-hmm. But please wait until I tell you it’s okay to make it.”

“Huh?” Lene’s expression changed to suspicion. I understood. Objectively, I was acting very strangely.

“This is insurance.”

“Insurance?”

“You’ll understand eventually.”

“I don’t really understand… But I will take good care of it.”

“If possible, please memorize it and destroy the paper.”

“Okay.”

Claire had finished her brûlée. “I want another. Make it.”

“Miss Claire, eating too many sweets at this time of night will make you fat,” Lene warned.

“Just one more. I’ll start a diet tomorrow.”

“But…”

“It’s fine, just make it. That’s an order.”

“It’s okay, Lene.”

“But if Miss Claire gains too much weight, she won’t be able to face her father.”

“Just the once is fine. We can do night-time exercises in Miss Claire’s room after this.”

“I will do nothing of the sort.”

I loved Claire’s look of utter irritation. “Oh, would you prefer we do it in my room?”

“That’s not what I mean!”

I was pretty sure she knew what I was implying, too.

We went through the process of making the crème brûlée again. It turned out so delicious that it was hard to believe Lene had never made it before, though she did get a little burned during the flambé.

“I’ll fix it for you. Hold out your hand.”

“It’s fine, this is nothing. I have ointment for it.”

“I want to fix it,” I said and forcefully took Lene’s hand so I could heal the burn.

“Thank you.”

“You don’t need to thank me. I can’t allow a woman to have a burn on her finger.” This was my art. I was glad for my water attribute.

“You two sure are close…”

I couldn’t let such a comment from Claire go. “You’re jealous, aren’t you Miss Claire?! What a predicament!”

“I am not! Don’t push your luck, peasant!”

“Oh my.”

It was an ordinary, happy day. I wished we could always be like this.

***

“Now, Lene will give us a lecture on service.”

“My name is Lene. Thank you for having me.”

When I introduced Lene, she smiled and bowed her head. The Knights weren’t quite sure what to do, but they applauded her.

Except for one person.

“Hey, peasant. Where do you get off using someone’s servant without permission?” Claire rushed over.

“Oh, sorry, I requested her,” Rod said.

Rod had asked me to introduce him to someone who was good at serving customers and cooking to prepare for our cross-dressing café. Lene was the first to come to mind. After her many years of experience serving someone as difficult as Claire, I figured she would have plenty to teach us.

“Well then… That’s fine,” Claire reluctantly sat back down.

“We’re all yours, Lene.”

Lene smiled and took the measure of her charges. “I have one request before I teach you all how to serve and

cook."

"Hmm? What is it?" Yu asked, relaxed.

"Unlike all of you, I am a commoner. I understand there are some commoners in the Academy Knights, but they are still among the elite and have passed a rigorous selection test. I'm sure many of you aren't pleased to be learning from someone like me."

"And?" Thane prompted Lene.

"I know it is bold of me to ask this, but I would like to request that when I am teaching, we disregard all distinctions between royalty, nobility, and commoner. You cannot serve customers if you cleave to such particularities."

"Hmm. I think it's fine. It's fine, right?" If Rod agreed to it, none of the other nobles could object.

"Thank you very much. Starting now, and until the Foundation Day Fair, please call me Ms. Lene." Lene's words sent a shock through the meeting room.

"Lene, don't get too haught—"

"Ms. Lene, please." Lene interrupted Claire's rebuke with a soft but unwavering tone.

"Wh-wh…"

"Claire, please address me correctly. Go ahead."

"Argh…"

"Ha ha! She's funny. Claire, do it," Rod joined in, thinking it a hoot.

"Argh… Ms.…Lene…"

"Louder, please."

"You!"

"Heh heh. Claire, you gotta say it," Yu chuckled.

"Ms. Lene…"

"Very good, Miss Claire. Please address me in that way from now on."

“I will remember this for later…” It seemed there was a lot Claire was holding back. Well, she’d probably say it all later, but Lene was surely prepared for that.

“Now, Ms. Lene, what do we need to learn?” asked Misha, who was adaptable and never had such baked-in class biases in the first place.

“First, you need to prepare yourselves. What do you think the Way of the Maid is?”

“Th-the Way of the Maid?” Claire cut in, suspicion in her voice.

“Yes, that’s right. What I’m going to teach you is called the Way of the Maid.” Lene maintained her soft smile, but she was giving off a different vibe than usual. It was kind of scary. “There is a great deal to this discipline. Under normal circumstances, it would be impossible to master this method in a mere week.”

“Don’t worry, none of us are planning to master the Wa__”

“However!” Lene stopped Claire mid-sentence by raising her voice. “It is my desire to share our dedication and service with aristocrats and commoners alike. That is why I am here.”

I could almost see the wall of flames burning behind her. Uh-oh. Some ominous switch had definitely been flipped.

“Yes. Dedication and service are fundamental to the Way of the Maid. I’m sure these are unfamiliar concepts to you, but they are integral to keeping the world going around.”

She continued with passionate words. In the end, Lene held our feet to the fire for over an hour.

“Now, then. I think that should give you an idea of what the Way of the Maid is.”

“Yes, Ms. Lene.”

“A very good response, Miss Claire. Let’s review. What is the essence of the Way of the Maid?”

“Dedication and service, Ms. Lene.”

“That’s right. Well done.”

“Thank you very much, Ms. Lene.” Claire’s voice was flat and robotic. The sparkle in her eyes had disappeared, too. And it wasn’t just her…

“Now, Master Rod. Where do the basics of the Way of the Maid begin?”

“With a greeting, Ms. Lene.”

“Good. Next, let’s try it all together.”

“Welcome home, Master!” everyone called out.

“Louder, please!”

“Welcome home, Master!” everyone shouted again.

“That’s right. I think you’re starting to get it. Your teacher is very happy.”

Lene smiled, looking deeply satisfied. When had this turned into a brainwashing seminar? I was starting to feel like I was at the recruitment drive for a cult.

“Um, Lene?”

“Ms. Lene, please.”

“Ms. Lene, are we perhaps taking this in a strange direction?”

“No, not at all. I just would like everyone to understand the beauty of the Way of the Maid.”

“I-I see…”

“Now you, Rae. Welcome home, Master?”

“W-welcome home…Master.” There was nothing I could do. This room was currently under Lene’s complete and absolute control. Well, everyone would surely go back to normal once we left the room…wouldn’t they?

“What are the basics of the Way of the Maid?”

“Devotion and service!”

“And a strong greeting?”

“Welcome home, Master!” everyone called out again.

Would nobody come to our rescue?

“That was terrifying…” Claire declared as she returned to her room.

“I am so sorry. I got carried away.” Lene was smiling sweetly, but Claire was keeping her distance. This was the first time she’d ever stuck closer to me than to Lene.

“I don’t even have the energy to get angry… I didn’t know you had that in you, Lene.”

“It’s certainly a rare sight to see.”

“I would be happy never seeing it again,” Claire said, flopping onto her bed.

“You can’t sleep yet, Miss Claire. You need to take a bath and change.”

“I’m tired…”

“You cannot. Please stand up.”

“Mmm…”

“Stand up.”

“Yes! Ms. Lene! Ah…” Claire shuddered at own her reflexive reaction.

“Oh, an unexpected side effect…”

“Or perhaps an aftereffect?!”

***

While the Academy Knights would be hosting a cross-dressing café, the other students were devising their own

shows. The work of overseeing it all took up the majority of our time.

"Thane, did you get the supply application form from Year 2, Class B?"

"I thought it was submitted yesterday…"

"It hasn't come in yet. Check again."

"Okay…"

"Rod, there is an inquiry from Year 1, Class A as to whether their application has been approved or not."

"I just approved it now. You can take this approval certificate to them."

"Got it."

"Misha, Year 3, Class C—"

We were all stuck doing paperwork. Rod was in charge, and under his supervision our operation ran without a hitch, which forced me to admit he might really have the qualities of a true-born king. It didn't make me like him any better, though.

"Claire, this ledger for Warehouse 1 is out of date. Please return to the site and revise the list."

"Understood."

"Let's not have you do it alone… Rae, can you go?"

"Of course."

"I *can* do it alone."

"Don't say that. All right now, get it done." That was all Rod had to say before he moved on to the next instruction.

"Fine, then," Claire sniffed. "Just don't get in my way."

I got the old ledger from Lambert, picked up a notepad and pen, and went with Claire to Warehouse 1. It was a massive building located outside of the Academy, and it was packed full of a wide variety of supplies, everything from spare desks to things I couldn't even identify. We collected a

key from the staff room and went to the front of the warehouse.

"By the way, did you hear, Miss Claire?"

"Hear what?" Claire asked while opening the padlock.

"They say that in this warehouse…there are sightings."

"You're teasing me with that again? There's no such thing as ghosts!"

"No, it's true. The ghost of a schoolgirl who got locked in the warehouse during a horrible cold snap and froze to death inside—"

"I-I don't want to hear it! Just get in!" Claire interrupted me by dashing into the building. An A+ response!

Our instructions were to catalogue everything within, but the warehouse was so packed that—despite Claire's protest—it would have been impossible for one person to tackle alone. Even with the two of us working together, we were going to be stuck here a while.

"Still, we have to get it done," Claire said. "I'll start from this end, you start over there."

"Are you sure you're okay alone? What about the ghost?"

"Hurry up!"

"Yes, ma'am."

Teasing Claire would have to wait; I got to work. We updated the items on the list one by one, starting from the entrance and the back respectively, and worked to meet in the middle.

"There are far fewer desks than previously listed."

"And it seems there are extra black curtains."

We traded idle conversation as we updated the ledger. It felt like it took us three years to finish, by which point the fading sunlight shone in through a high west-facing window.

"Let's go back."

“Yes, let’s.”

We returned to the entrance, but for some reason, the door was closed.

“That’s weird. I’m pretty sure we left the door op—”

“Oh.” I swallowed a gasp.

This was it. I remembered this event from the game.

“It won’t open!” Claire, who had no way to know that, was upset.

One of the patrolling teachers had found the open warehouse door, assumed it had been left open carelessly, and shut it. In other words, we were locked in. In the game, the player character got trapped in the warehouse with her target prince, but I was locked in with Claire. It was *perfect*.

“Hey… Somebody? Is anyone there?!” Claire cried out as she pounded on the door.

I shrugged. “No one comes out here unless they have a reason to.”

“Why aren’t you freaking out? We’ll be stuck here all night!”

“Well, if we’re not back by curfew, someone will come looking for us.”

“That may be so, but…” Claire was fidgeting.

“Huh? What’s wrong, Miss Claire?”

“I-It’s nothing…”

“Are you sure? You look restless.”

“You’re imagining it! Someone! Is anybody there?!” Claire kept pounding on the door. There was an unlocking spell, but it required the wind attribute, which neither of us possessed. We *could* just bust through the wall, but as members of the Knights, we were both reluctant to destroy school property.

“Unnnh!”

“Miss Claire, let’s just wait.”

“I will not!”

“Why?!”

“Why? Well…”

“Well?”

Claire blushed and said nothing.

That was when it hit me. “Wait, do you have to go to the bathroom?”

“Yes, I do! Do you have a problem with that?!”

Hmmm. All right, now this *was* a problem. “You can use that shaded area over there.”

“I can’t do that!”

“Yeah, you’re right.” If even I would hesitate to do it, there was no hope for aristocratic Claire. “Is it urgent?”

“Very…”

Oh dear. “Okay, how about this?”

She watched intently as I went to a corner of the warehouse and touched both of my hands to the ground, activating my earth magic. In just a moment’s time, I’d built a cube as tall as a grown man.

“What in the world is that?”

“A toilet. It’s simple, but I made it using my earth magic attribute. Would you like to look inside?” I opened the door.

“Well done, peasant!”

“Much obliged.”

“Well then, I’ll just—”

And with that, Claire rushed into the bathroom. She closed the door, and I heard the lock fall into place…and then, silence.

“Hey, I need sound!”

“I can’t help you with that.” I understood she was embarrassed by the sound of doing her business, but this world

didn’t have the convenient white-noise machines Japanese bathrooms came equipped with. “Can’t you just run the water while you go?”

“Y-yes, I suppose I can.”

Thanks to my water attribute, the magic toilet’s plumbing was more than up to the task. I heard the sound of running water, followed by a sigh of relief…and then a cry of surprise.

“Ah… Ahhh?!”

“What is it?”

“What is with this toilet? Ahhhh, warm water!”

“Ohhh, that’s the bidet.”

In the spirit of maidly “dedication and service,” I’d used my water attribute magic to add some bells and whistles.

“You can’t afford to waste paper in a situation like this, right? So wash thoroughly and come out when you’re dry.”

“O-okay… Oh?!”

I could see how a bidet would give you a fright if you weren’t used to it. Wait a second. Could I use this to make money? Bidets would be hard to mass-produce, since both earth and water magic were needed in to create them, but maybe they could be luxury products aimed at aristocrats?

While I was counting my unhatched eggs, Claire finally emerged.

“Ugh. Such a weird feature…”

“But it’s hygienic!”

“That may be true, but still!”

We fell silent for a moment.

“Hey, don’t just clam up,” Claire muttered.

“I was just thinking how cute you are when you’re embarrassed.”

“You peasant! Do you know who you’re talking—”

“I am speaking to the Lady of the François, rescued by a peasant when she was about to wet her pants, right?”

I could almost see the steam rising from Claire’s ears. She narrowed her eyes, summoning a magical spear of fire. “Ah… Heh heh. That’s fine, then. Let’s just incinerate this black spot on my history.”

“Miss Claire, I apologize! Please put that away. We’re in a warehouse—just look at all the things that could catch fire.”

“If it’ll help me discover your weaknesses, I’ll burn everything to the ground.”

“Think about having to redo the ledger from scratch! It would be agony.”

“I’ll have new supplies delivered. Then the moving company can make the list.”

“Stop, Miss Claire! It was just a little maid joke.”

Just as Claire was about to literally explode, we heard Lene’s voice calling for us from outside. Well, that was what I got for taking my teasing too far. I needed to be more careful.

Well…maybe just a *little* more careful.

***

A few days before the Foundation Day Fair found the Academy Knights still swamped with chores, but also busy preparing our own booth.

“Okay, everyone, please stop what you’re doing and pay attention for a minute.” Lene clapped her hands in the front of the room. At the sound of her voice, the Academy Knights froze in place. It seemed the results of the Way-of-the-Maid boot camp were long-lasting.

“What is it, Le—Ms. Lene?” Even Rod called Lene by her preferred title. After all, as far as the café was concerned, she was in charge.

“The costumes you will wear at the fair are ready. Please try them on.”

A number of merchants from the Aurousseau Company brought in boxes of clothes at Lene’s instruction.

“The men will dress as maids, and the women will dress as butlers. I had them tailored slightly large to be safe, but if they’re too big, we can take them in,” Lene said as she handed out the costumes.

“We need a place to change… The guys can change here, and the girls can change in the empty classroom next door,” Rod suggested with a laugh. The room we were presently in was a bit of a disaster zone, so he likely considered this chivalrous. Following his directions, the guys and girls split off into their respective rooms.

“How ever does one wear butler clothing?”

“Oh. I’ll dress you.”

“I’ll ask Lene to do it…” It seemed Claire thought I was overeager, and she was right. Then again—

“Lene is dressing the guys in the conference room.”

“I suppose I have no choice, then…”

“It works…” Rod looked at himself and then at us.

“It does work,” Claire and I said.

“Something’s up with Rod…” Thane said with a sigh.

“Rod’s always like that,” Claire answered, shrugging.

“I hope this skirt stays up,” Yu chuckled.

“The butler outfit is more comfortable than I expected,” Misha said, looking satisfied.

The maid costumes were classic with a Victorian touch: black and white with a long skirt, designed with an eye for practicality, and just a few embellishments to the apron. When the guys put on their white-brimmed bonnets, they looked just

like English maids, even though this world had no relation to England.

The butler costumes were also Victorian in design. They consisted of a black jacket, white shirt, gray waistcoat, and red tie, and the final effect was also reminiscent of an old-fashioned English steward.

"My lords… They look wonderful on you."

"Ha ha, really?" Rod gave a strange laugh in response to Claire, who seemed stunned. He hadn't skimped on the makeup, and with his natural good looks, he made a striking girl…though he could stand to tone his expressions down a bit.

In contrast, Thane was having the grump to end all grumps. He had beautiful features, too, and in this getup, he looked startlingly like Misha. Which was to say, icy. Claire was peering at him with a complicated expression.

"Hey, Misha, do I look strange?" Yu said, but he was clearly having fun.

"I think you look lovely…"

The pleasing princes were pleasing, even dressed as girls. When Yu noticed me staring at him, he winked. It was surprisingly cute, but completely ineffective, as I only had eyes for Claire.

"When we first talked about wearing men's clothing, I had trouble imagining it… But it's not bad." Misha sounded almost a little too pleased by her costume. Her reserved personality had translated all too well into donning the mantle of a full-fledged butler. The nape of her neck peeked through her tied-back hair, which was, ahem, quite sexy.

And then—

"Why do I have to wear men's clothes…and servants' clothes at that…?" Claire looked sullen. "And you—you really are a peasant to the core! Servants' clothes suit you perfectly."

"Well, I *am* your servant, Miss Claire."

"Hmmm… But this was unexpected," Rod said, dissatisfaction in his voice.

“What is it, Master Rod?” Lene asked.

“When I suggested a cross-dressing café, I was imagining gaudier outfits that would look funny and make us laugh. No one’s going to laugh at this.”

I was about to retort that we didn’t need to make people laugh, but somebody else called out to Rod before I could. “If that’s what you want, you don’t need to worry.”

The speaker was Lambert, a pretty boy himself, who also looked gorgeous in the maid outfit. I was wondering what he meant, when—

“Ah ha ha ha!” Rod exploded in laughter.

“Master Rod! Please don’t!”

The reason was Commander Lorek. The sight of that rugged warrior dressed as a woman fulfilled all of Rod’s expectations. It looked like Lene had tried really hard to do his makeup, but there was only so much she could do.

“I told you I didn’t want to do it…” Lorek was crying, which only made his makeup run.

“Lorek… You pass. Actually, you’re the star of the show.” Rod continued to chuckle uncontrollably. Everyone else wore expressions that suggested they wanted to join in but didn’t dare.

“I’m not going to serve any customers!” Lorek declared that he would be holed up in the kitchen.

“Why?” Rod was completely bewildered by subtlety.

“Rod… That’s enough. Poor Lorek.” On the other hand, Thane was more emotionally savvy than his brother. Thanks to his graceful intervention, Lorek was allowed to take charge of the kitchen.

“But what’s the selling point of Cavalier, then? What’s the point of a cross-dressing café that’s not funny?”

Lene raised her hand. “Master Rod, I believe you will find there is demand for a café where beautiful boys and girls

are the servers. And that this will prove especially true if the servers are royalty and nobility."

"Is that so?" Rod still had his head cocked to the side, but I thought Lene was correct. Commoners would be attending the Foundation Day Fair, too. These were the princes of the kingdom, and tons of folks would jump at the chance to be waited on by them—for a variety of reasons. "Whatever, then. Just brace yourself for the day of the fair, I suppose."

I did wish he would change his attitude. I detested the way he talked.

"What's wrong?" Claire looked at me quizzically.

"Nothing. I was just trying to get a bad taste out of my mouth."

***

"Table three, order up."

"New customers seated at table five."

"Table one, check."

"Your total comes to 1,480 Gold."

Lively voices echoed back and forth. We had carried a number of tables into the classroom rented by the Academy Knights, and they were all full. A queue ran outside, meaning the cross-dressing café was a qualified success.

The Foundation Day Festival happened to fall on a public holiday that year, leading to record attendance numbers. Our flow of customers hadn't ever dwindled since the opening ceremony, and actually, it seemed like the lines were just getting longer.

"Excuse me, Miss? Is that right? You're very pretty."

"Ha ha ha! Thank you very much." Rod laughed as he served the customers, clearly in a good mood.

"Wow, Master Yu! You're so cute!"

Yu came back with, “Apparently, I’m much cuter as a lady,” and an elegant smile to boot.

“That one’s a bit dark, though.”

“But also so beautiful. Though I suppose a bit creepy?”

Thane was silent, plagued by a confused expression.

“Hey, I wonder who that is.”

“Looks like a cold but gorgeous nobleman!”

“Are you ready to order?” Misha was playing her role to a T, her face cool and composed.

“Did you see? Miss Claire is serving people.”

“Yeah. I never thought I’d see the day that selfish brat welcomed customers.”

I held myself back from cutting in. There was one person in our crew who was faking a smile, but that couldn’t be helped.

“There are so many customers. I haven’t been able to put the frying pan down once!”

“Busy is good. Here’s the next order, Commander Lorek.”

The kitchen was also going full-steam ahead, mostly run by Lorek and Lambert. Overall, it was safe to say the Academy Knights Cavalier Café was a hit.

“If this keeps up, we could easily be voted first place,” Rod said.

Visitors to the fair got to vote on which show they’d liked best, and the class or group that took first place won travel vouchers they could use at resorts during summer vacation. In the game, this translated into unlocking snapshots from special events. I personally didn’t care whether or not I went on vacation, as long as I got to go (or stay) with Claire.

“Master Rod, get back to work. You’ve been summoned to table six.”

“Oh, is that so? I’ll be right there.” With a light step, Rod went off to serve.

“What were you talking about?” Claire asked me.

“He was saying we might win first place in the popularity vote.”

“We shouldn’t be beholden to travel vouchers,” Claire complained. “As members of the Academy Knights, we ought to be able to organize our own vacation trips.”

That might have been true for the nobles, but commoners like me couldn’t really afford to go jet-setting off to resorts. “Come now,” I said. “Back to work. Le—Ms. Lene is watching.”

“Erk!”

“Rae, you’ve been summoned to table two,” Misha said to me as she brought some empty dishes to the kitchen.

“Huh, me?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, lucky you. I wonder what kind of eccentric would want to share a meal with a commoner, though?” Claire chuckled.

“If you’re going to abuse me, I’d rather it be in the bedroom.”

“What in the world are you talking about?”

“Just my true desires. I’m going now.”

I took a tray and headed to table two. When I saw who the customer was, I felt my stomach drop.

“No problem. Closer.”

They were foreigners, speaking a broken form of the kingdom’s tongue. The embellishments adorning their clothes made it clear they were noblemen. Furthermore, the well-built gentleman in the turban was unmistakably royalty.

“Graciously, this is His Royal Highness Marcel, Prince of Loro. He graces you with his company,” his attendant said.

The Loro Empire was to the west of the Bauer Kingdom, in a tropical region. It was an important transportation hub and did valuable trade with the Bauer Kingdom for various goods, such as spices. Marcel was the Crown Prince of the Loro Empire.

I was thrown off because I'd suddenly remembered this was one of the events in the game.

"Will you please take our order?"

"Please excuse me. What can I get for you?"

"Hmm. Get him something with dodo bird. His Imperial Highness is fond of dodo bird."

"I'm very sorry. Unfortunately, we do not have anything with dodo bird."

Prince Marcel frowned. Seeing this, his attendant stood.

"This is extremely disrespectful. Prince Marcel has placed his order; you must fulfill it."

"Please forgive me. The dodo bird is rare and not easy to source in the Bauer Kingdom," I tried to explain as politely as possible, but His Highness Marcel shook his head.

"This is what he wants. You will do something about it," his attendant repeated.

It took everything I had not to sigh out loud. When this event occurred in the game, the prince whom the heroine was closest to stepped in to save her. But I wasn't close to any of the princes. While I was standing there, my face about to twitch, wondering what to do—

"Please excuse me for interrupting your conversation, Your Highness Marcel."

I was stunned. Claire had stepped in to take care of Prince Marcel, addressing his Highness in perfect Loronese.

"Unfortunately, we are unable to prepare the dodo bird that Your Highness enjoys so much, but I am sure royalty such as yourself would enjoy sampling some special new ingredients." She gave Prince Marcel a bright, sweet smile I'd

never seen on her before. It looked like her charm was working, since Marcel stopped his attendant from standing to complain again and addressed her himself.

“Y-yes. You speak excellent Loronese. What is your name?”

“My name is Claire François, Imperial Highness Marcel of the Empire of Loro. It is my pleasure.” Claire looked genuinely pleased to have met him. Prince Marcel frowned harder.

“Claire, are you saying you will serve me something I will find satisfying?”

“I guarantee you will enjoy it.”

“Good, then. I leave my order to you.”

“Thank you very much.”

Claire respectfully and subserviently took my hand and led me to the kitchen, where she lowered her voice so the prince wouldn’t hear her and let out a deep sigh.

“Ugh… Just talking to a pig like that is exhausting. A pig from a porcine, new-money empire…” Claire looked at me. “You were useless, too. You can’t behave like that in front of a person like His Highness Marcel. You have to flatter him.”

“O-oh…”

“Well, I suppose it would be impossible for a commoner who has never spoken to such royalty to learn,” Claire said haughtily. As the daughter of the Minister of Finance, she undoubtedly had experience managing the moods of foreign diplomats. “Peasant. Go into the kitchen and make that mayonnaise dish.”

“Mayonnaise?”

“That’s right. They definitely don’t have it in the Loro Empire yet. If we serve him that, I’m sure the pig will go home satisfied.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Hey, don’t just stand there!”

“Right! Um… Claire?”

“Wh-what is it?”

“Thank you very much!”

Taken aback, Claire said, “I-It’s not for you! If this becomes a diplomatic incident, it’ll be terrible for my father.”

There she was, making up excuses. She was so cute. “Thank you very much for playing at being cold.”

“Stop saying silly things I don’t understand and get to cooking!”

“Yes ma’am.”

In the end, Marcel enjoyed a mayonnaise shrimp dish that left him more than satisfied, though that was undoubtedly partly due to the magical smile Claire trained on him. Still, I’d never thought Claire would come to my rescue. This would have never happened in the game. Perhaps the heroine’s fate was changing?

“I would hate it if Miss Claire was the losing character,” I murmured to myself.

“What did you say?”

“Nothing. I love you.”

“Stop saying stupid things and clear the dishes.”

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“I just got back… Rae, time to switch.”

“Good work. Now I’m off.” I was trading shifts with Thane, who had just gotten off his break, so I could take my two-hour one. The cross-dressing café was as busy as ever, but the crowds were starting to thin. At this rate, I could leave it to the others to finish up.

“Two whole hours… What should I do?”

If this were a school festival in Japan, then I would go around the other booths with my friends. But the closest thing I had to those here were Misha and Lene, and they were both working.

"Bad timing," I sighed as I took off my butler's costume in the empty classroom next door that we were using as a changing room.

"Ugh…"

I looked up to see my beloved Claire enter the room.

"Good work. Are you on break too, Claire?"

"That's right. I still don't understand why I had to do vulgar things like serve customers," she muttered as she unbuttoned her jacket. I offered to help, she refused, and then I helped her change anyway.

"But Miss Claire, you're so good at it. I was really surprised."

"I'm used to stitching things up on the surface. Don't forget that I am the daughter of the Minister of Finance."

"I like the normal, honest Miss Claire."

"What about me is honest? Just quit it with the flattery. I'm perfectly aware I have a difficult personality."

We'd had a similar conversation before, but it was really hard for me to watch Claire be this self-deprecating. She had such a reputation for being selfish, high-handed, and prideful; I was sure *Revolution*'s players could never imagine her speaking like this.

"You're certainly not easy to handle, but that's true in some way for everyone, isn't it?"

"Are you telling me I'm nothing special?"

"Not at all. It just makes me sad to see you put yourself down."

"Put myself down? I'm not…" Claire trailed off, probably realizing there was no other way to interpret what she'd just said. "Ahh, I must be tired from doing all this

unfamiliar work. To think I would blurt out something like that in the presence of a peasant."

"I'm glad you did. You've shown me your vulnerable side. May I capitalize on that?"

"Idiot. Come on, I'll wait for you. Hurry up and change."

"Huh?"

"Why are you looking at me like I fell out of the sky? I'm telling you to come and help distract me," Claire said, looking away. I stopped in the middle of changing my clothes.

"Miss Claire."

"What is it?"

"How do you think I look in this?"

"I told you already. They make you look like a servant, just like a peasant should."

"So you mean they look good on me?"

"So what?!"

I held out my white-gloved hand to calm the squawking Claire.

"If only for a short time, I will serve as your escort," I said, looking Claire directly in the eyes and smiling in my most gentlemanly fashion.

"Where shall we go?"

"I don't want to go somewhere with food. It will undoubtedly not be worthy of eating."

"Isn't food what a school festival is all about?"

"I have the right to decide what I put into my body."

Such was our conversation as I escorted Claire down the Academy hall. We passed a number of people, some clearly nobles, and others that were unmistakably commoners, judging by their clothing. It was a refreshing change from the

usual sights of the Academy, where both nobles and commoners dressed to the nines. Claire frowned occasionally at the sight of the commoners but didn't ultimately complain.

"How about here?"

"What is this?"

"It's a haunted house."

"Absolutely not!" Claire tried to run away, but I held her hand.

"Hey, Miss Claire. Are you scared of ghosts?"

"N-no, that's not it. I'm just not interested in childish tricks!"

"Okay, okay. Sorry. Two Academy student tickets, please."

Brushing off Claire's complaints, I signed us up to go in.

"Miss Claire."

"Wh-what do you want?"

"If you get scared, you can hold on to me."

"Don't be stupid… Agh!"

But Claire was already clinging to me. Mission successful.

"That was terrifying…"

"Thank you for letting me witness such an adorable side to you, Miss Claire."

As we emerged from the haunted house, I was supporting Claire, whose teeth were chattering. We headed to the rest area in the courtyard, where a number of guests were taking breaks next to flower beds blooming with the colors of spring.

"Let's sit for a minute. I'll get us something to drink."

"Don't get anything weird. I just want water, got it?"

“Your wish is my command.” I grinned at Claire, who never missed a chance to give me a tongue-lashing, and went off in search of water. I got enough to share at a snack stand, and immediately returned to her. *Almost* immediately. I spied something interesting at a store I passed on my way and bought two.

“You sure took your time.”

“Please excuse me. Here is your water.”

Claire was still weary, but she put the water to her lips and took a sip. Life returned to her eyes.

“Miss Claire, I also got this for you. It’s not much, but…here you are.”

“What?”

It was an amulet with a magic stone set in the center of intricate silverwork. It wasn’t just an ornament but a good luck charm. The stated effects included…

“Luck in love?”

“I hope things go well with you and Thane.”

If this were Japan, I would buy something like this at a Buddhist temple or Shinto shrine, but the closest thing this world had was the Church. The booth I’d stopped by was manned by the Academy’s chapter of that organization.

“You really are strange.”

“Why is that?”

“I know you’re just teasing me, but even so. You’ve been professing your love for me, right?”

“I’m serious.”

“And yet you support Thane and me. That’s strange,” Claire said, playing with the amulet in her palm. I thought she looked almost lonely, though I wasn’t sure why.

“I care more about your happiness, Miss Claire, than having my love returned.”

“That’s a hypocritical comment.”

“Well, that’s a fair opinion. But it’s the absolute truth.”

“Why are you so obsessed with me?” Claire looked at me, her eyes flickering.

“Because you saved me.”

To put it bluntly, my previous life had been completely devoid of hope. I was employed by a corrupt company that worked me so hard I only went home to sleep. The only things that made me want to keep living were my games, and there was no game I immersed myself in more completely than *Revolution*. I even gave up on sleep to write fanfiction. It was no exaggeration to say that Claire had given me the will to live.

“You’re teasing me again. I saved you? That’s stupid.”

Of course, Claire couldn’t understand. She wouldn’t believe me if I told her about my previous life or being transported to this world, and there was no helping the fact that she only ever thought I was teasing her.

“Well then, save me now. Specifically by hugging or kissing me.” So I just teased her, like I always did. That was all I could do. Nothing more.

“Stop saying stupid things. Our break’s almost over. Let’s go back.”

“Yes ma’am.”

I held my hand out for Claire, but she didn’t take it.

“Your time playing at being a gentleman is over. I am me, and you are you. I am a noble, and you are a commoner. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“That’s too bad. That means I’ve lost my excuse to hold your hand, Miss Claire.”

“You really are…”

And we were back to our usual selves.

But there were two things I didn’t notice at the time. First, that Claire had accepted the amulet I gave her. And second, that her expression bore a hint of sadness.

Chapter 3:
The Commoner Movement

"THIS SCHOOL IS RIFE with discrimination!" I heard someone call out one morning after the Foundation Day Fair. I was heading past the lobby to the cafeteria with Claire, and when I looked over, I spied five or six students gathered together, holding placards.

"Down with the aristocracy!"

"Abolish noble excess!"

They were chanting their messages in unison.

"Those commoners are really pushing their luck." Claire frowned at having to endure such an unpleasant sight so early in the day.

"What are they up to?" I asked.

"It's a peasant disease."

Lene explained Claire's sharp words. "Apparently, they're representing the Commoner Movement. They're calling for equality between the aristocracy and commoners."

Ah, so it was time for *that* to begin. I remembered this part of the game.

"It's completely scandalous! Commoners wanting to be treated as if they're aristocrats? Ludicrous. The King bestows them with his grace and look how they behave."

"Ah…" I glanced away.

"What an indifferent reply. Or…do you agree with your peasant friends?" Claire's voice dropped in pitch.

"No, no, I'm not particularly interested in politics. All I care about is being with you, Miss Claire."

I was in favor of class equality, generally, but to be honest, I wasn't all that invested. However—

“Hey you! It’s Rae Taylor!” A group of people ran up to us, calling my name. “As a representative of the general public, what are you doing here?”

By “here,” they meant with the young lady heir of the François family, the epitome of conservative nobility.

“What? I’m Miss Claire’s maid.”

“What did you say?!”

My answer set the group abuzz. Claire dismissed them out of hand, which was what I would have liked to do, too.

“Listen! We represent the people’s hope and dreams. Will you allow yourself to be corrupted by the nobility after proving you exceed them in every regard?”

“I have no intention of being corrupted by the aristocracy.”

“Isn’t the role of maid equivalent to a slave of that very aristocracy?! Deplorable!”

These people really weren’t listening to what I had to say. “Um, can I go now? I’m not what you’d call a political person.”

“You don’t get it! *Everyone* is a political person!”

“Ahhh…”

Just when I thought I’d had enough, Claire cut in with a look of abject disgust. “It’s lovely that you have your principles and all, but don’t dare force them down other people’s throats.”

“Who are you to talk?! You aristocrats are the ones forcing your will on the people!”

“What did you say?!”

This was bad. Claire was hot-tempered as well as a noble, born and bred. She wouldn’t stand for being criticized for the sin of being who she was.

“You guys, that’s enough,” a cool voice cut in.

“Mr. Lambert…”

Lambert strode in to intervene in the standoff. Lene blinked in surprise at the sight of her older brother.

"I sympathize with your Movement," Lambert told the protesting students, "but this is the Academy. You will gain no favor by disrupting daily life at an institute where nobles and commoners already learn together in an integrated environment."

"Oh, would you get off your high horse, Mr. Lambert? The Aurousseau Company should be on the front lines of the battle to abolish the aristocracy!"

The Aurousseau firm was one of the most powerful organizations run by commoners, and it commanded the same status and influence as low-ranking noble houses. The activists clearly didn't appreciate Lambert, the oldest son of Aurousseau, siding with an aristocrat.

"Equality is a worthy ideal. But you will get nowhere making such uncompromising demands in this kingdom, not as it is now."

"But—"

"Miss Claire, I'm sorry to have kept you. Please, be on your way."

"Lambert, be certain to discipline them harshly. I wouldn't want these commoners getting any *more* ideas."

"I understand."

"Good." Claire flounced away, and Lene and I followed. "Ugh… And you were totally useless, too. You mustn't give such people so much as the time of day. In the future, ignore them."

"Ah…" I said.

"But, Miss Claire," Lene said. "You must understand why they feel that way. The life of a commoner is a punishing one—"

Claire slapped her across the face.

"Silence, Lene," she said.

Lene was quiet for a moment. “I’m so sorry.”

“As long as you understand.”

Claire continued walking as if nothing had happened. Taken out of context, the incident might cast her in an especially villainous light, but the truth was that all aristocrats in this era—and perhaps even many commoners—shared the same unassailable belief in the natural, moral supremacy of the nobility.

Lene remained quiet.

She had a complicated expression on her face, and why wouldn’t she? As the daughter of a merchant, Lene was ultimately a commoner. She had worked under Claire, a bona fide aristocrat, since her childhood and had seen firsthand the stark differences in their standards of living.

“Lene.”

“What is it, Rae?”

“Don’t do anything stupid, okay?”

“Okay?” Lene probably took my words to mean that I thought goals like breaking down the aristocracy and achieving equality were stupid. But I had something different in mind.

For now, I had to do something about the tension in the air. “Miss Claire.”

“What is it?”

“I’m hungry.”

Claire looked taken aback by my inability to read the room.

“You are such a…” She sighed and then continued with an unusually bitter smile, “It’s not too long till lunch, so you’ll just need to wait.”

“Yes ma’am. Lene, what are you going to eat today?”

“Well, probably a chicken-and-egg stew.”

“Good. I’ll have a beef bowl.”

“Just once, I’d like to see you two eat something a little more refined.”

And with that, we were back to our normal routine.

Despite myself, I thought back to what the protestors said. *“*Everyone *is a political person!”* I still didn’t consider myself one, though not for the reason the activists likely assumed. Just thinking about the encounter gave me a headache.

“Miss Claire, my head hurts. Will you feed me my breakfast?”

“What nonsense are you spewing now?!”

“Hmm? You prefer mouth-to-mouth? That’s a little too much, even for me.”

“I said nothing of the sort!”

Teasing Miss Claire was the best way to ease my stress. I wished we could stay like this forever.

“You’re so selfish,” I said. “Well, then—I’ll feed you instead.”

“Unnecessary! And what does that have to do with your headache?!”

“Huh?”

“Don’t look at me like you don’t know what I’m talking about!”

Doting on Claire. That was my politics, my principle, and my position.

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“Now, Lambert, let us proceed with today’s agenda.”

“Yes, Commander. Please look at the materials in front of you.”

I was at one of the Academy Knights’ council meetings.

“It seems the friction between the nobles and commoners at the Academy has heightened as of late,” Lambert started. “Some scholarship students have started a movement calling for immediate, complete equality between social classes, which upsets the aristocrat students. A number of complaints have been registered with the Academy Knights.”

“I saw them in action. It’s wretched, isn’t it?” Claire sighed. “Can’t we crack down on these activities?”

“Freedom of thought is guaranteed both within and without the Academy. We can’t ban people from acting on their political ideology.”

“How annoying.” Claire had a confounded look on her face, as if she had bit into an apple and discovered a worm.

“How many people are part of this movement?” Rod asked with interest.

“At the moment, less than twenty, including potential supporters.”

“If that’s all, then why don’t we just leave them alone?” Yu asked, nonchalant as always.

“That was our intention, but a few of the more extreme activists have incited a few skirmishes on Academy grounds.”

“Skirmishes…?” Thane frowned.

“Yes. They seem to be clashing with nobles about giving way in the halls, sitting down first in the cafeteria, and other minor issues of the sort.”

“That is a bit troubling,” Misha said, sighing.

It seemed no one was sure what the activists’ intentions were. Everyone here was or had been a noble, except for Lambert, whose family was well-off, and me. They weren’t equipped to understand how a commoner might feel.

“I think it’s simple. They want to be equal to aristocrats, right?” I said.

“Equal to *aristocrats*? Risible.” Claire snorted. “This isn’t simply a matter of birth and upbringing—the lineage of nobility and common folk are fundamentally, completely divergent.”

The aristocracy of the Bauer Kingdom were descendants of powerful clans from the days before the establishment of the kingdom. Historically, these families had amassed power through agricultural surplus, which had enabled them to train and maintain armed forces. When the Bauer clan brought these other major families under their banner as would-be monarchs, the powerful houses who swore fealty to House Bauer became the nobility of the new kingdom.

“And what have the commoners contributed to this country?” Claire continued.

The nobility performed vital functions in exchange for the authority to collect taxes from their estates. These included stable governance of territories, promotion of local industries, and training and dispatch of soldiers. The way aristocrats like Claire saw it, they had the right to make political decisions because they kept the country running, while commoners weren’t even qualified to participate in most debate.

“You’ve got it wrong, Claire… Simply paying taxes is in itself a critical contribution to the kingdom. If the people didn’t pay taxes, Bauer would crumble,” Thane said, in an uncharacteristically long speech. His broad outlook was testament to his experience in imperial studies.

“Do you mean to say you agree with their views, Master Thane?”

“I didn’t say *that*… Among other things, there’s too wide a gulf between aristocrats and commoners when it comes to matters of education and intellect. I don’t think it’s realistic to have commoners participate in politics.”

“Exactly.”

Oof. That was about as much awareness as you could expect from the current royal family. A completely democratic system of elected representatives like modern Japan, where

anyone of a certain age could participate in politics, regardless of gender or financial status…that was a fairy tale far out of reach in the Bauer Kingdom.

"Well, I still don't see how this is a concern. We can just leave them be, like Yu said," Rod said, trying to shelve the topic.

"There is one other issue," said Lambert.

"Huh?"

"There are rumors that the Church is backing the Movement."

"The Church?" All color drained from the princes' faces.

"The Church has long taught that all men are equal in the eyes of God. This meshes well with the message of the activists."

Like I mentioned when I adopted Ralaire, the prevailing religion of this land believed in the existence of spirits of earth, water, fire, and wind. These spirits were worshipped, as was the supreme spirit God, who was said to have given birth to the elemental spirits. The Church taught that the world had been created by the grace of that God and that the recent advances in magic came through the power of these spirits.

Worship of the elemental spirits had started among farmers, and though a simple notion, it was powerful in that simplicity. Fear and respect for nature's power had grown into a major religion. Furthermore, the Church actively sought to educate commoners in a number of subjects, including the treatment of illnesses and injuries. Their influence on the people was too strong for even the royal family to dismiss.

"Has the Church said anything outright…?" Thane asked.

"Not at this time. It seems they are maintaining their official stance of political neutrality."

"Then there's not much we can do right now," Misha said, voicing what the rest of us were thinking.

“As the Academy Knights, we cannot simply ignore the noble students’ complaints. For now, if you witness a confrontation, please intervene. And be careful not to place blame squarely on the commoners,” Commander Lorek said, ending the conversation.

We discussed a few more items on the agenda, after which the meeting was finally brought to a close.

“By the way, Miss Claire. Why don’t we go to the northern forest for summer vacation?” I said at the end.

“Isn’t that a bit off-topic?”

Our cross-dressing café, Cavalier, had been voted the best booth at the Founding Day Fair, and as luck would have it, we’d won travel vouchers to a summer resort. “All that serious talk made me tired. I want to relax.”

“You… And why would you demand such a thing of your master? You should be the one helping *me* to relax.”

“May I?!”

“I can tell by the look in your eyes that you’re thinking of something dirty!” Claire was ruining the mood.

“Miss Claire, your mind’s in the gutter.”

“What were you thinking, then?!”

“Would you like to know? Heh heh heh.”

“See? It is something dirty! You really are… Hey, where’s Lene?”

“Lene said she had to talk to Mr. Lambert about something,” I answered, pointing to where Lene was conversing with her brother, a serious look on her face.

Claire gazed at the siblings for a moment, contemplative. “If all commoners were as discreet and diligent as Lene, we could have some peace.”

“What about me, Miss Claire?”

“If all commoners were like you, then I would seriously consider fleeing the country.”

“Eloping? That sounds great!”

“I would not take you with me!”

Lene returned while we were in the midst of our usual old-married-couple routine (at least, that was what I thought of it as).

“Welcome back, Lene. What were you talking about?”

“Nothing important. Just…”

“Just?”

“I may have seen something.”

“Seen what?” Claire pressed.

Lene hesitated before answering, “A member of the Commoner Movement meeting with Master Yu.”

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Yu, the third-born prince, didn’t share a mother with his brothers. Rod and Thane’s mother was an Alpecian princess from a bordering nation, but she had passed away after giving birth to Thane—another contributing factor to Thane’s general listlessness, but I’ll get to that story later.

The current queen, Yu’s mother, Riche, had originally been a cardinal of the Spiritual Church. Unlike with Catholicism back in my original world, women could hold high-ranking office in the Spiritual Church. In fact, they were widely considered to possess greater spiritual and mystical affinity than men. The current pope was, notably, a woman.

More importantly for our purposes, the king had married Riche in an attempt to bring the Church’s burgeoning power under royal control. Instead, their union had strengthened the Church’s ties to the royal family and given it even more clout than before. Yu could accurately be described as the fruit of the union of church and crown.

“I can’t imagine Master Yu would do something like that casually,” Claire said. Yu projected an air of carefree airheadedness, but he was cunning. He had to know he was in a delicate position, politically.

“No, I did meet with them,” Yu said, suddenly interrupting our conversation.

“Master Yu?!”

“They were asking me if the Church could help them. I turned them down, though,” Yu said, his grin unwavering.

“That was careless, Master Yu.”

“Was it? I refused their request, and I don’t think anything will come of it. But the Church’s doors are open to all, so I was at least obligated to hear them,” Yu responded gently.

“But Master Yu, don’t you think they might have approached you not because of your ties to the Church but because you’re of the royal family?” I blurted out.

“In theory, perhaps. But it’s well known that my mother was a cardinal of some influence.”

Claire wasn’t backing down. “If that’s true in theory, then *in theory*, couldn’t you have used conflict of interest as a reason not to meet with them?”

“Perhaps. But I’m not entirely averse to the Commoner Movement,” Yu said, surprising us.

“Have you lost your mind?!”

“Come now. Do you think equality is so morally objectionable?”

“‘Right’ and ‘wrong’ are being nonsensically applied in this context; it’s simply unrealistic. Who would run the country if not the nobility?”

“Well, the commoners, of course.”

“Ha! They have no idea how difficult it is, even for the most highly educated aristocrats. Can you imagine the illiterate and ignorant attempting to govern?”

“In other words, if the commoners were educated, it wouldn’t be a problem?”

“Well…” Claire was at a loss for words.

“Personally, I think the aristocracy will eventually come to an end.”

“What are you talking about?!”

“Leave aside your biases and think rationally for a moment. The nobility are far outnumbered by the commoners. Do you think we could win in the event of an armed uprising?”

“We have an army!” Claire, who couldn’t wrap her head around the idea of her social class ceasing to be, was visibly emotional. Yu, on the other hand, remained calm and collected.

“The army is strong. But now there’s magic to reckon with, too. We’re starting to see individual commoners powerful enough to match even the most exceptional soldiers. Soon, it will all come down to numbers.”

“But…”

“Anyway, the aristocrats live the lives they do because of the taxes paid by the people they control. What logic can justify ongoing control if the people refuse to *be* controlled?”

Claire was silent, upset to see the legitimacy of the aristocracy—that she believed in as naturally as she breathed air—be called into question.

“Miss Claire,” I said.

“What is it…?”

“All this serious talk has made me hungry.”

Claire nearly fell over. “Would you… Can’t you read the room?!”

“Ha ha ha, this was definitely a heavy subject. Sorry, Claire,” Yu chuckled.

“No…it’s…”

“Let’s go to the cafeteria. We’re already running late, so it’s going to be crowded.” Yu left the meeting room, musing over what he would have for lunch in the exact same tone of voice he’d used to talk politics. I really didn’t care for him.

“Hey, you,” Claire called when I went to follow Yu.

“What is it, Miss Claire?”

“What do you think of Yu’s argument?”

“I think it was complicated.”

“You mean you couldn’t understand it?”

“I understood, but…” I wasn’t sure what Claire was hoping to hear from me.

“Do you think that the aristocracy will fall soon, too?”

“I don’t know.”

“I see…”

“But even if you were no longer an aristocrat, I would still serve you, Miss Claire.”

Claire gave me a surprised look. “But why? If there were no aristocrats, and the world became what those in the Movement want, then there would be no reason to serve me.”

“Of course not. How many times have I said it? I serve you because of love, Miss Claire.”

Claire frowned. “Another joke.”

“I’m not joking. I am completely serious.”

“All right, fine. It was stupid of me to ask you,” Claire said. She set off toward the cafeteria, and I followed her.

“Miss Claire, I *am* serious, you know?”

“Yes, yes. So what are you going to eat today?”

“The beef bowl.”

“Again… You really like that, don’t you?”

“You remembered my favorite food, Miss Claire!”

“What are you so happy about? With how many times you’ve eaten it in front of me, any idiot would remember,” Claire sulked.

“How about you try it too, Miss Claire?”

“No, thank you. Dissatisfaction sours a meal.”

“Then I’ll share a bite.”

“I said: no, thank you!”

“What? You won’t open your mouth wide for me?”

“I said nothing of the sort!” It looked like she was almost back to normal.

“Miss Claire.”

“What is it?”

“I will protect you, no matter how this world changes.”

“I told you, you don’t need to protect me.”

“No matter what happens,” I repeated.

“Whatever…” Claire seemed flustered, perhaps by my uncharacteristic seriousness.

“For now, let’s start with this,” I said, pointing to the cafeteria. As Yu had said, it was extremely crowded.

She didn’t answer, lost in thought.

“Now, Claire, let’s go!”

I dragged Claire, dejected face and all, in after me.

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“Wh-what? Why do I…” Claire was indignant.

“It’s work, and it’s time to do it.”

“I am aware. But why must *I* do it, when anyone else would suffice?”

“Miss Claire, we’re the newest members of the Academy Knights. That means that we have to do the most basic chores.”

We were on an errand for the Academy Knights to pick up sundries from the market in the capital. The stalls we passed seemed to mainly deal in fresh foods, boasting an array of delicious-looking fruits and vegetables. In a testament to the booming economy, the marketplace was overflowing with people.

“With a crowd this big, we might get separated. Shall we hold hands?” I asked.

“That’s fine,” Claire muttered.

“It’s fine? Then allow me.”

“I. Will. Not!”

“Ahhh.”

“You two really are close…”

“They really are.”

Misha and Lene were accompanying us on our errand. Although the princes were also new members of the Knights, they weren’t given such tasks for obvious reasons, so the job had fallen to us. Claire had wanted to stay behind, too, but we had so much to buy that we pushed her to come along. Of course, she wouldn’t be carrying anything. Her trusty attendant Lene would be doing that for her.

“And what are we buying?”

“Umm, ten sheets of parchment, twenty sheets of vellum, two bottles of ink, one set of paints, one leather strap, one set of nails, and some tea and biscuits.”

“So, mostly office supplies.”

“Most of the Academy Knights’ duties are clerical work, after all.”

“The biscuits are the only fun thing on that list.”

“Yes.”

“Let’s buy some new sweets from Broumet!”

“Impossible, Miss Claire.” Misha flatly rejected Claire’s suggestion.

“Why?”

“Broumet is too expensive. If you want to shop there, you’ll need to use your own money.”

“How much did I bring today, Lene?”

“We didn’t plan on private shopping, so only about one hundred thousand Gold.”

“That’s not enough…”

Think of one Gold as one yen. One hundred thousand yen was a princely sum to a commoner, but mere pocket change for a powerful noble; it wasn’t nearly enough to buy sweets from Broumet.

“Let’s just focus on work today, all right? We can buy sweets next time.”

“I suppose I have no choice,” Claire frowned and shrugged her shoulders, looking longingly down the road. Her expression pinched. “Ew…”

I followed her gaze at that last bit and saw two children dressed in rags, begging for alms. One had a bandage around her leg.

“There have been more beggars since the conflict with the Nur Empire began,” Misha said matter-of-factly.

“The price of food is rising, too…” Lene said, looking at the children with sympathy.

“But wages are increasing as well, aren’t they?” said Claire.

“Not fast enough. Employers tend to be conservative when raising wages, since it’s difficult to lower them once they’ve gone up,” Lene explained.

“Well, that’s their responsibility to bear, isn’t it?”

“Employers are commoners, too. Life isn’t easy for any of them.”

Claire stopped talking. It looked like she’d been given something to think about.

“Miss Claire,” called a familiar voice.

“Oh, it’s you. What a coincidence.”

It was the senior maid of the François household, whom I had met at my job interview.

“I am here with the master on a shopping errand, but when he saw you, he said I should ask you to come see him.”

“Father said that? I’m busy right now.”

“I thought as much, but he says it’s urgent.”

“It can’t be helped, then… Would you all accompany me?”

If one of the kingdom’s most elite aristocrats requested our presence, we could hardly refuse. We trailed after the chief maid to the main street, where a large, ornate carriage stuck out like a sore thumb on the side of the road.

“Hello, Claire. Hello, students. Pardon me for not disembarking,” said a good-looking man with golden hair like Claire’s as he opened the carriage door.

“Hello, Father. What need have you of me? We are shopping for the Academy Knights.”

“Hmm? Do I need a reason to call my daughter over if I spy her in passing?” Dole said indifferently.

“Father…I am busy.”

“I can’t imagine you have any business that takes priority over me.” Dole cocked his head to the side. It was like any conversation between parent and child, but for better or worse, Dole was the epitome of an aristocrat. “If you must go shopping, hop on. I’ll even let you commoners ride with us, just this once.”

“We aren’t going to the noble neighborhood.”

“That’s all right. It’s an aristocrat’s duty to see how the other half lives every so often.”

And so we piled into Dole’s carriage, which was pulled by three horses and large enough to comfortably seat five people. I didn’t know if it came equipped with some sort of suspension system, but the ride was surprisingly smooth.

At first, no one spoke. Misha and Lene were so clearly nervous that I felt sorry for them.

“How is the Academy, Claire?” Dole finally broke the silence. He grinned as he spoke, delighted to have a chance to talk to his daughter, who was living away from home.

“It’s fine. The Commoner Movement is a bit annoying, but other than that, all is well,” Claire answered shortly.

Teenage daughters sure were a lot to deal with.

“Ah, the Commoner Movement. The fool’s errand counterpart to His Majesty’s meritocratic policy. This is precisely why I opposed that policy from the start…” Dole rubbed his temples. “What do you think of it, Rae Taylor?”

Claire’s eyes went wide. “Father, what are you playing at? Not only do you remember the name of a commoner, but you actually address her by name?”

“I’m merely curious. I heard she has the best grades of any of the transfer students this year, and I would like to hear her thoughts,” Dole said, as if to emphasize that the question had been casual.

“Yes, well…” I said. “Miss Claire asked me the same thing, but I don’t care much about the Movement. All I care about is being able to spend time with Miss Claire.”

“I see. A good answer. But the fact remains that you are a commoner. Do you not yearn to live the life of a noble?”

“I’d rather see Miss Claire be happy than seek my own comfort. I don’t long for the life of a noble. As long as I have enough to eat every day, I’m content.”

“Is that truly how you feel?”

“It is.”

Dole was staring at me. There were no etiquette rules in this country about looking people directly in the eye, so I met his gaze evenly.

“I see. I don’t think the average commoner shares your views, at this point. I hope there will be more people like you in the future.”

“Much obliged,” I responded with a light bow. *Thank you ve-Rae much,* I thought.

To clarify, I didn’t find the Commoner Movement objectionable in the least. I agreed with its guiding principles and did think it would be good to reduce the kingdom’s ludicrous wealth gap. Personally speaking, though, I liked working as a maid for Claire much more than I wanted to participate in politics.

“Well, I must say I enjoy this company. Let’s get something to eat, shall we? Senior maid, take us to Broumet.”

“Yes, sir,” said the senior maid, who was driving the carriage. She had quite a wide variety of skills.

“Father, don’t make such a decision on your own. I told you I’m here on business.”

“It’s just a small detour. If you have any problems, just give them my name.”

“That’s not the issue.”

“Then what is it?” Dole knew he could do as he pleased. “Have you had Broumet desserts before? As a commoner, you’ve probably never had chocolate.”

“I haven’t,” Misha answered when asked. I had eaten it before in my previous life—and also happened to be the creator of chocolate in this world—but I said nothing.

“That’s what I thought. This will be a novel treat. Broumet really does have a grand development team.”

After that, the chatty patriarch of the François family really did take us to Broumet and buy us treats. With his

carriage at our disposal to finish up shopping for the Academy Knights, we ended up back at school earlier than expected despite the detour. The praise the other Academy Knights lavished on us for the chocolate we brought back, on the other hand, is another story for another time.

***

"Commander, it's bad!"

"What's this ruckus?"

The boy who brought the message to the Academy Knight meeting was pale. "It seems a noble student has hurt a commoner student!"

"What?!"

The room was suddenly alive with action.

"Tell us the details."

"Right. Apparently, this afternoon, the noble Dede Murray and a commoner boy got into a fight in the courtyard."

"Dede did?!" Yu suddenly perked up. Dede was Yu's attendant; he'd been the dealer when we played cards with Yu.

Once someone became an attendant to the royal family, they were promoted to the ranks of the nobility themselves.

"So that's why he wasn't around…"

"Let's hear the report," Thane prompted.

"Yes, please."

"Right. It started as a simple disagreement, but more and more students nearby got involved, and it grew heated. Then…one commoner made an insulting remark about Master Yu, and Dede lost his patience and attacked him with magic."

"Dede would never do something so…" Yu trailed off.

"Perhaps the facts as reported are garbled and more will emerge in time. But this much is clear: the commoner was

seriously injured and has been taken to the Church clinic, and Dede has presented himself of his own accord to an army tribunal."

Yu stared in disbelief, his princely composure gone.

Rod jumped to action. "Yu, go to the army headquarters and find out Dede's condition. That's fine, right, Commander?"

"Yes, that will be helpful. If he's in the middle of an interrogation, you likely won't be able to intervene, but if he's detained after, only his family or Master Yu will be allowed to see him." Lorek nodded. "Given the circumstances, Lambert will escort you."

"I'll go at once."

Yu and Lambert quickly left the meeting room.

"I'd like to hear more of the commoner's side of the story, too," Rod said.

"Shall I go? Perhaps they will talk to me, as a commoner myself," Misha volunteered. While she looked collected as ever, she had to be all torn up inside. No matter how you sliced it, Yu was involved in how this had played out. It was clear she wanted to help him if she could.

"I can't allow you to go alone, Misha. Claire, go with her."

"Understood."

"Then I will, too." I went wherever Claire did.

"Thanks. Let's review the situation and take action where necessary. With any luck, we can nip this in the bud before it escalates."

Commander Lorek was head of the Knights, but it was Rod who assumed the mantle of leadership in times like these. The commander understood the necessity of this and left the decisions up to Rod.

"Now, everyone, move!"

The clinic where the injured student had been taken to was run by the Spiritual Church. It charged for its services on a sliding scale: the wealthy paid high prices and the poor paid nearly nothing, and consequently the Church had earned massive goodwill from the common folk. There were several such clinics in the kingdom, but this one was located on Academy grounds. Being part of an institution where magic was practiced and the Academy Knights fought monsters, it was equipped with state-of-the-art technology and personnel—partly because most of the student-clients were nobles, of course.

When we arrived at the clinic and asked to see the student, we were told he was still undergoing treatment. We took up positions in the waiting room.

"The commoner probably said something outrageous. It's his own fault," Claire said as we waited.

"But isn't attacking him with magic an excessive response?" Misha said.

"A commoner shouldn't be mouthing off to a noble in the first place. Imagine if it were the other way around… When did commoners get so disrespectful?"

"So if the roles were reversed, it would be fine?" I asked.

"Well…I mean, a noble shouldn't say anything untoward, either, but…"

"But you're welcome to speak to me in that way. Please swear at me all you like!"

"Watch yourself." Claire had to feel the gravity of the situation, because her response was more measured than usual. Ah, well.

When we were finally allowed in to see the injured boy, we gasped involuntarily at the sight of him. More of his body was wrapped in bandages than wasn't. Even Claire, who had just said that he deserved it, was at a loss for words. Not even she could dismiss the severity of his condition.

"I am Rae Taylor. What's your name?"

“Matt…Matt Monte.”

“Hi, Matt. We’re here on behalf of the Academy Knights to hear what happened to you. I know you must be in pain, but would you lend us a few minutes of your time?”

“No,” Matt said immediately. “The Academy Knights are on the side of the aristocracy. I have nothing to say to you.”

“The Knights are on the side of the students,” Misha said in a calm voice.

“Spare me your official stance. Leave me alone,” Matt said, and lay down.

So this was what they called a ship without a port, huh?

“Hey, Matt,” I said. “I don’t want to put it this way, but it would be better if you talked to us. Commoners like you and I are at a disadvantage when we’re up against aristocrats.”

“Right?! There is no justice in this country! That’s why we need to bring about—ow!”

It seemed my words had struck a nerve.

“Matt, settle down. We’re here precisely because we want to keep anything like this from happening again. Will you please talk to us?”

He was quiet.

“Please,” I said again. I tried to look him in the eye with the most honest and open expression I could muster. Matt remained quiet for a few moments, but finally, he opened his mouth.

“It was…it was just an argument at first,” he started.

Matt was the member of the Commoner Movement whom Yu had met with. He’d tried to request the Church’s explicit support, but Yu had turned him down. His fellow members had comforted him, telling him it couldn’t be helped, but their words did little to make Matt feel better, and he’d fallen into a deep depression.

That was when Dede told Matt to stay away from Yu.

“What’s so special about an aristocrat? Do you realize how ridiculous it looks to we commoners for you to hoard all that wealth and power? And now you say we’re not even allowed to petition the prince?” Matt had fumed at Dede, who responded with aplomb…until he thought his Lord Yu was being insulted. Dede asked Matt how he could be so ungrateful as to say such things about the nobility who protected him.

“A crowd started to gather around us…”

The argument soon turned into a debate over the very existence of aristocrats and commoners. The “discussions” heated up.

“It made me so angry…and then I said it.”

He’d said that the royal family was a parasite, preying on the commoners to survive.

“You said what?!” It was our noble representative, Claire, who was the most shocked by these words.

“Miss Claire, this is not the time. I understand how you feel, but it’s beside the point.”

“But!”

“I will listen to your protests later. Right now, our job is to listen to Matt.”

“Ugh…” Somehow, Claire brought herself under control. I would pat her on the back later—not that she would let me.

“And then? What did Dede do?”

“He looked upset the entire time, but when I said that about Yu, it was like a switch had been flipped. He pulled out his wand, and before I knew it, I was encased in a ball of flames.” Matt hugged himself and shuddered, as if reliving the moment. “When I woke up, I was in this bed. It was only then that I realized what he did to me.”

His face was full of frustration as he looked up at us.

“If the Academy Knights really are on the side of the students, then, please, make sure he is punished.”

"It's ultimately up to the Academy to decide how to handle this. We have to hear out Dede's side of the story, too. But we will do everything in our power to make sure you aren't silenced."

"Please…" Matt said again, before sinking into his bedding.

"Let's let him rest. We got what we needed."

***

"This is bad…" Rod groaned.

"The people are blocking the doors today, too. The Academy won't be able to function if this keeps up," Lambert said bitterly.

Word of the courtyard incident had escaped the Academy and spread through the general populace. Furious crowds were staging protests outside the walls, and though they hadn't yet tried to batter down the doors, there was no telling what would happen if they weren't appeased, and soon.

"Dede's excuse is a little far-fetched, too…" Thane sighed.

Dede had told Yu and Lambert that he only pulled out his wand to scare Matt, not intending to use magic or cause him such serious injury. But Matt *had* been injured—burned all over his body, in fact—so that story was hard to believe.

"What's the word amongst the citizenry?"

"They're now saying an arrogant aristocrat committed grievous violence against a commoner for no reason."

"Well, that's not far from the truth… But that doesn't help the matter." Rod stroked his chin.

As Yu's bodyguard and attendant, Dede was a skilled magic-user who had undergone strict training. He had rigid self-control and better skill with his magic than most people.

So why had he flown off the handle for such seemingly little cause?

"Dede would never do something like that." Yu was adamant.

"And yet, he did. I examined Dede's magic wand, but there was no evidence of malfunction or tampering," said Lambert. Like I said before, Lambert specialized in the development of magic tools. His opinion had weight.

"What is going on…?" Yu hung his head. I admit it was hard to see the usually cheerful prince so upset.

"Well, moping around will do us no good. We need to decide on our next course of action," Rod said.

"Indeed," Claire agreed.

"To be honest, the situation outside the school is beyond us. That's up to the government…and possibly the military, to handle." At the end of the day, the Academy Knights were a school organization, and there was only so much a handful of kids could do to do in the face of mass protests. "Let's focus on what we *can* do. How is the mood among the student body?"

"Pretty much the same as outside. We have the commoners on one side and the high and mighty aristocrats they resent on the other. The commoners have even been disrupting lectures by directly criticizing the nobility," Lambert answered Rod.

"How do you think we should address this?" Rod asked him.

"Honestly, I'm not sure," Lambert said. "Perhaps things will settle down if some sort of disciplinary action is taken against Dede…"

"What sort of punishment are we talking?"

"That's a tricky question. It would be one thing if he were a low-ranking noble, but Dede's family are mid-tier nobles with connections to the Church. If his punishment is too harsh, we'll see backlash from both of those quarters."

The fact remained that the injuries Matt suffered could well have killed him. The Church had needed to employ a high-level water attribute healer as well as numerous precious magic tools around the clock to save his life.

“And what of the noble students? How have they reacted?”

“No public demonstrations yet, but there’s some muttering about not granting commoners any more favors.”

“It’s finally getting dangerous…” Rod muttered bitterly.

“Miss Claire, what does he mean?” I asked Claire.

“Is your head screwed on right? Listen up. If the situation deteriorates any further, we’ll lose our point of compromise.”

“Point of compromise?”

“The middle ground that both nobles and the commoners can accept.”

“For the time being, Thane, Yu, and I will speak with the other noble students. A few words from their future king ought to make them see sense,” Rod said, crossing his arms. “Misha and Rae, you convince the commoners that we’ve taken charge of the situation. Let’s make sure this doesn’t escalate further..”

“I’ll do my best,” said Misha.

“Ahhh.” I wasn’t good at either politics or negotiation.

“Don’t complain. This is a direct order from Master Rod, so give it absolutely everything you’ve got.”

“Then, Miss Claire, please tell me to do my best. With love.”

“Stop acting the fool. This is an emergency.”

“I am completely serious. If you don’t say it, I won’t go.”

“Why not, Claire? Say it for her.” Rod tossed me a lifeline, albeit with a bitter smile.

“What are you saying, Master Rod?”

“C’mon, hurry up!”

“You’re…going too far!”

“Hurry!” I was persistent. It was a bit mean.

“Do your best, Rae…” Claire said reluctantly.

“There wasn’t enough love in that. One more time.”

“That’s enough, get to work!”

I gave in.

A few days later, we had done everything we could to mitigate the Academy’s internal conflict. The aristocrats had been persuaded to settle down by the princes, mostly Rod, but the commoners remained heated. There were far fewer scholarship students than nobles, but public opinion was with the commoners. Protests and demonstrations continued outside the school on a daily basis, only reigniting dissatisfaction on the aristocrats’ side in turn.

The day when Dede’s punishment was to be announced finally arrived, and people from all walks of life thronged the courtyard where the incident had taken place to await the proclamation. When the announcement was finally made…

—Notice—

Let it be known that Dede Murray shall be imprisoned for one week’s time.

“This…is not right.” Claire blinked.

It was a laughably light sentence. Shouts and screams rose up around us, as if the commoners were echoing my thoughts.

“Miss Claire, please come this way. This place is about to be dangerous for nobles,” Lene pulled on Claire’s sleeve.

“But we have to calm them down!”

“That’s not possible right now. They want blood, and they’re not going to listen.”

“Argh…”

“Miss Claire, Lene is right. We need to get out of here, now.”

Together, we somehow persuaded Claire to leave.

“What’s going to happen now…?” she muttered as we departed, giving voice to precisely what all the students at the Academy were thinking.

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The Academy lost its ability to function. The protests at the gates grew more violent by the day, and the screams of the assembled citizens were like the roar of thunder. Soldiers were dispatched to protect the school gates, but they were vastly outnumbered. Fragile equilibrium tilted ever more toward danger.

“The Academy will likely close until things settle down.”

The Academy Knights were gathered once more. Rod stood at the front of the room, telling us the school officials’ decision. They’d determined they couldn’t guarantee the safety of the noble students under present circumstances.

“If that’s how they feel, they should have given Dede a different punishment,” Claire said furiously. Even she, a purebred aristocrat with a strong prejudice against commoners, found the lightness of his sentence unacceptable.

“It was…a bit weird,” Thane said.

“What was, Thane?”

“Just like Claire said… It doesn’t make sense.”

Indeed, coming at a time of such conflict between aristocrats and commoners, it should have been obvious that a

light sentence would only fan the flames. It was a bad move no matter which way you sliced it.

"About that. It seems they acted on a request from some of the nobility," Lambert said bitterly.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that some aristocrats who are unhappy with the Commoner Movement sought for Dede's punishment to be reduced."

Rod frowned at this news. "And just when I thought they were starting to see sense."

"This is our fault."

"It is…"

We'd thought the noble kids had been pacified by the princes, but instead, their smoldering dissatisfaction had redirected in the worst way.

"It seems like the Church had a hand in reducing Dede's punishment, too," Lambert said.

"What do you mean? I thought they supported the Commoner Movement?" Misha asked.

"Well, that's just politics," Rod answered with disgust. "What the Church *really* wants is to supersede the royal family."

"They support the Commoner Movement in public and the nobility behind the scenes. They probably think pitting the social classes against each other gives them a chance to swoop in and seize power from both the royal family and the nobility," Yu chimed in. It sounded ridiculously wicked when you said it out loud.

"A power struggle…" Thane said, bitterly.

The Church was a respected and powerful force. Much as it claimed to be motivated by charity and the desire to improve people's lives, the people at the top were a formidable political force.

“It’s clearly the Church that most benefits from this furor. Yu, Queen Riche isn’t involved in this, is she?”

“I hope not…but I don’t know. I can’t say what my mother is thinking,” Yu mumbled. He probably didn’t want to believe his mom had had a hand in this, but he couldn’t rule out the possibility, especially since it was a known fact she wanted him to ascend the throne if possible.

“Have you spoken to her?”

“Nope. I requested a visit, but she refused.”

“Isn’t she your mother?” Thane demanded.

“Even so, she’s the queen. It’s not that simple, Thane.”

There was tension in the air.

“The Church may be trying to sow discord between the princes, too!” Claire suddenly burst out.

The princes whipped around to look at Claire. A moment passed, and they each began, little by little, to soften.

“She’s right. We can’t turn against each other now.”

“Yeah.”

“Ahh…”

“Either way, there isn’t much the Academy Knights can do,” said Rod. “Other than assist the military, if it comes to that.”

“All we can do is sit and wait,” Claire said, as everyone nodded in agreement.

“Miss Claire, I have a favor to ask of you,” I said on our way home through the dusk after the meeting.

“What is it?”

“Once you retire to your room tonight, please stay there until tomorrow night.”

“What’s this all of a sudden? I hate when you do that,” Claire peered suspiciously at me. “And what about school?

Class may be cancelled, but we still have Academy Knights work to do."

"Please take the day off."

"I can't take a day off in the middle of an emergency like this. This is exactly why we joined the Academy Knights," she said, looking at me like I was crazy.

"Rae, is there a reason you're asking this?" Lene asked me, but I couldn't tell her. Explaining would just complicate things more.

"There's no way to get you to take the day off?" I asked.

"I don't want to."

"I see… Then I'm left with no choice."

Claire looked at me quizzically. I pressed my fingertip to her forehead.

"What…are…" Before she could finish the sentence, Claire collapsed.

"Miss Claire?! What did you do, Rae?!" Lene rushed between Claire and I, as if to guard her from me. Just like Lambert, her hazelnut eyes glittered with caution.

"It's okay. She's just sleeping." One of the water attribute's spells could put people into a sound sleep. It was meant to allow them to recover their energy and heal from injury, but with a little added power, it could work on a healthy individual, too.

"Why would you do something like this?!"

"There's going to be a riot tonight."

"Huh?!"

"You must hide in the dormitories with Miss Claire. Whatever happens, don't do anything stupid."

"What do you mean?"

"Lene," I said, ignoring her question. "Do you like Miss Claire?"

"Why would you…"

“Just answer me.”

“Of course I like her. I have served her far longer than you have.”

“Then I’m entrusting her to you, Lene. I’m putting my faith in you,” I said, turning to return to the Academy building.

“Wait!” Lene called after me. “Are you…the same as me?”

It was a purposefully ambiguous question. Only someone who knew what she meant could answer.

“No.”

“I see…”

There was an awkward silence. We both knew that answering in the negative meant I knew what she was talking about.

“Please take care of Miss Claire,” I said.

“Okay…”

And with that, I headed back toward the Academy. There was a great deal left for me to do.

“I’m sorry, Rae… Miss Claire…”

I pretended not to hear the weakness in Lene’s voice as I walked away.

That night, the school gate was broken down.

***

“What is going on?!”

“The main gate is down! A mob is pushing into the school!”

“The young nobles are in danger! Protect the dormitories!”

“Evacuate the staff, too!”

“Hold the line until reinforcements arrive!”

I could hear the soldiers yelling outside the room where I stood in wait. It was around 11 p.m. at night. Eventually, I heard footsteps approach and stop in front of the room. The door was unlocked and opened, and a figure entered, moving toward the back.

“Were you going to take advantage of this opportunity, Mr. Lambert?” I said.

Lambert stopped in his tracks. He turned on the light.

“Rae Taylor…”

We were in a laboratory that belonged to the Academy’s research department. I had picked the lock and snuck inside.

“A bell that controls monsters… That was one of your inventions, right, Mr. Lambert?”

“What are you doing here?”

“I came to stop you.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Lambert responded curtly. “I heard the uproar and came to check on my precious magical tools—”

“You tampered with Dede’s wand prior to the incident in the courtyard, didn’t you?”

Lambert narrowed his eyes.

Yu was right about his attendant; Dede would never attack someone as he apparently had Matt. Personality aside, it was unfathomable that he would fail so catastrophically to control his magic.

“As the resident specialist, you were ideally positioned to make adjustments to people’s magical tools. You deliberately rigged Dede’s wand so it would explode.”

“What are these accusations? The wand was examined, and no defects were found.”

“But you were the one who testified to that, Mr. Lambert. You intended to accompany Yu to visit Dede in

custody even if Commander Lorek hadn't ordered you to, didn't you?"

This silenced Lambert.

"You've been instigating the conflict between nobles and commoners at the Academy, haven't you?"

"What proof do you have?"

"I have no proof. But I *know* everything."

This was all knowledge I'd acquired by playing *Revolution*, so I had no decisive evidence. Still, I knew Lambert's plan. In the midst of the chaos, he would activate his monster-controlling bell and try to call a powerful monster down on the school. In the game, the heroine and her chosen prince saved the school, but naturally, I much preferred we avoid that dangerous scenario altogether. Therefore, I'd taken steps to prevent it.

"Everything…?" Lambert asked.

"I know you don't care about the Commoner Movement."

The Aurousseau Company was the largest merchant business in the kingdom, commissioned by the government to oversee the excavation and distribution of magical stones. If the royalty and nobility who comprised that government were deposed of, their business would disappear with them.

"Then why would I do any of the things you're accusing me of?"

"Because Lene's life is at stake."

Certain forces had told Lambert they would kill Lene if he didn't do what they said.

"My sister is certainly important to me. But do you really think I would endanger the rest of my family for only her?"

"If she were only your sister."

This time, Lambert's eyes widened. He couldn't have imagined I knew what I'd just implied.

“How much do you…”

“I told you, everything.”

Lambert was in love with Lene—not as a sister, but as a woman. To save her, he had no choice but to do as the people holding her hostage directed, even if it meant putting their family’s livelihood in danger.

“Mr. Lambert. Please give up.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Mr. Lambert!”

“He’s a terrible man. If I fail, he’ll kill Lene.” His fear was writ large on his face.

“I will protect Lene.”

“How?”

“I’ll talk to him.”

“He can’t be reasoned with!” There was a hint of self-scorn in Lambert’s face as he spat the words. He must have had this debate with himself many times before.

“Please trust me.”

“I can’t.”

“If you don’t stop, I’ll stop you.” I armed myself with my magic wand.

“I won’t let you,” said a familiar voice.

I turned, a chill running down my spine. There in the door stood Lene, accompanied by several men. One held Claire’s still unconscious body, a knife pressed to her neck; she released a small moan.

“Lene…” I murmured.

“I’m sorry, Rae. You must let my brother go.”

“Lene, think it over.”

“No.”

I didn't respond. I wanted to trust Lene. I wanted to believe she hadn't been lying about caring for Claire. But maybe it was impossible for love to alter fate.

"Rae, move over there," Lene directed me.

"I can go, but it won't help," I said.

"What?"

"I already broke the bell, just in case."

"What?!" Lambert slipped past me and ran to the back of the room. He opened the cabinet and withdrew the shattered halves of the bell. "What have you done…?"

I'd known it was possible Lene would take Lambert's side. Breaking the bell had been my form of insurance.

"That's enough. Please give up, Lambert, Lene," I said.

"Brother…"

Lambert said nothing, seemingly overcome by despair. Lene rushed to his side.

"Hey, hey, we can't have this," said one of the men in a bright, cheerful tone that didn't suit the mood. His face was concealed by a black mask. Who was this? This scene had never occurred in the game.

"Without the magic bell, there's nothing we can do," Lambert said.

"Let me see it." The man took the bell from Lambert's dejected hands. "*Return.*"

My eyes widened as I watched the two halves of the bell mend back together, as if time had been rewound. What was this magic?!

"This should do it, yes?"

"Yes…" Lambert sounded like he couldn't believe his eyes, but he timidly took the bell and tried to activate it.

"I won't allow it!" I cried.

"Rae, don't move! Don't make me hurt Miss Claire!" Lene said sharply. When I looked, a single red line ran down

Claire's neck.

Something inside me snapped.

I tried desperately to keep my bearings, despite the anger that flooded through me. This was all my fault. I'd been convinced that because I knew the game, I could control what happened. But now Claire was in danger because of me, and I had to do something.

Just as I was starting to despair…I heard another familiar voice.

"To think you could change the commoners' lot on your own…was a flagrant, arrogant, mistake."

As the voice echoed, the men were enveloped in flames. Their screams tore raggedly through the inferno.

"Even your screams are vulgar. It suits you, thieves."

"Miss Claire!"

"I don't get all of what's going on here, but it sounds like the Aurousseaus were behind it?" Claire stifled a yawn, then laughed. Apparently, she'd been awake for a while. "That's unfortunate, Lene."

Lene was silent. Shame kept her head down, and she refused to meet Claire's hostile eyes.

"Aurousseau siblings, stick to the plan."

The flames were suddenly extinguished, and the cheerful-voiced man spoke once more. The other men had collapsed save for that one individual, who remained standing, untouched.

"Do your jobs, and I will help you escape overseas," the man said. "Then you can change your names and live as lovers, not siblings."

I thought he sounded just like the serpent, tempting Adam and Eve.

"Don't listen to him. Surrender," Claire told them.

"I'm so sorry, Miss Claire. We can't turn back now."

And with that, Lambert activated the bell.

The monster who manifested within the workshop looked like the work of an avant-garde artist. With a lion head, goat torso, the tail of a viper, and bat wings, it was even larger than the water slime we had previously encountered.

“Is that…Chimera?!” Claire screamed.

The chimera was a monster from Greek mythology, said to breathe fire and possess supernatural strength. Legend told that its flames could reduce entire mountains to ash. In this world, however, Chimera was a dangerous monster of a very special sort. While most monsters were animals who consumed magical stones and subsequently transformed, Chimera had been born of military-sponsored magical experiments.

“Claire, we have to run. Leave it to the army.”

I might have been transported to this world as the game’s player character, but I had no intention of becoming the heroine the game wanted. It was ridiculous to fight such a dangerous monster alone. The army was headed this way, and they could handle it. We didn’t need adventure.

“No!” Claire stubbornly stood her ground. “I’ll stop it here.”

“Miss Claire?!”

“Every second we wait, it wreaks more havoc! Everything I let it get away with will be taken out on Lene!”

“Miss Claire…” Lene was choked up at Claire’s words.

Yup, that was my Claire. She still cared about Lene, even after being betrayed. She was high-handed, arrogant, and selfish, but she was so much more than that.

“Ahhh…” I sighed. “You have a losing personality, Miss Claire.”

“Why?”

“Even in times like these, you’re worried about those who hurt you.”

“N-no, that’s not it,” Claire denied, flustered. “Lene belongs to me! She’s my servant, so it’s my responsibility to supervise—”

“Ohhh, right. Mm-hmm. You can keep pretending not to care, if you like, but this is an emergency. We don’t have time for that.”

“Whatever! *You* go call the army.” Claire motioned to shoo me away.

“What are you talking about? I’m going to help you.”

“I wish I could say I don’t need your help…but clearly, I could use it.”

“Does that mean I belong to you, too?”

“I haven’t accepted you yet.”

“There you go again.”

“Let me stop your fun right there, ladies.” The black-masked man interrupted our banter. “Mr. Lambert. Stop moping and get Chimera moving.”

“As you say…” Lambert hesitated, but he still rang the bell.

“Charge. Terminate the nobility.”

In response to the masked man’s command, Chimera let out an earth-shaking roar. It was the same Hateful Cry the water slime had used, with the same paralyzing properties.

“Er… Miss Claire, can you move?”

“Who are you talking to? I would never make the same mistake twice.”

The Hateful Cry was difficult to fend off if caught off guard, but it could be resisted by those prepared and ready to fight.

“Do you know Chimera’s magic attributes?”

“Of course.”

Chimera had three attributes: fire, earth, and water. The lion's head was fire, the goat's torso was earth, and the viper's tail was water.

"I will be here to assist you, Miss Claire."

"I'm ready." The words had barely left her mouth when Claire summoned a fire spear. "Burn to ashes!"

She whirled her magic wand, sending the spear flying at Chimera. But the monster swung his tail with agility that seemed impossible, given its massive size, and struck the spear out of the air.

"It looks like straightforward attacks won't cut it. It isn't as stupid as it looks."

"Then how about this?" I generated a stone arrow and fired it behind Chimera. My target was Lambert, who held the magic bell.

"Brother!" Lene cried.

"Don't worry."

Right before it reached Lambert, the stone arrow was repelled by a wind barrier the masked man threw up. Apparently, he was a wind-wielder.

"Aiming for the controller is smart, but you didn't even hesitate to shoot at a guy who used to be your friend. You're a girl with no mercy," the man with the black mask said, disgusted.

My priority was protecting Claire and ending the battle. I liked Lene, and sympathized with Lambert, but if it was them versus Claire's safety, my choice was obvious. Putting Claire at risk once had been more than enough.

That said, it would be difficult to target Lambert as long as the masked man was there to protect him. We were going to have to defeat Chimera after all. Speaking of which—

"Miss Claire!"

The monster opened its massive jaws wide, and I grabbed Claire, hugging her tight in anticipation of what

would come next. She screamed in protest, but in the next moment, we were engulfed in flames.

"That was close…"

"What was that?"

"Chimera's Fire Breath. It's more powerful than you can imagine."

I had thrown up the strongest water barrier I could summon, but the rest of the lab was in ruins. The magic tools used for analysis were reduced to cinders, and even the brick walls were partially melted. We were now in real danger of carbon monoxide poisoning with all the smoke, and the roof might collapse at any point.

"Let's go outside," I whispered to Claire, so Lambert couldn't hear.

"But! It'll do even more dama—"

"We'll lead it to the rear schoolyard. People are still mostly congregated on the athletic field. The Academy students and staff are probably in the dorms."

"Got it," Claire nodded and threw a fire bomb at the brittle walls, melting a hole just big enough for a person to pass through. "Run!"

"She's the daughter of the Finance Minister. Don't let her get away!" we heard the masked man cry as we ran.

We didn't respond.

Lambert rang the bell and ordered Chimera to pursue us. The research building collapsed behind us moments after we made it through the front door. Cold sweat ran down my back.

"Any chance they were crushed in the collapse?"

"Doesn't seem like it."

Just as I said that—Chimera burst through the debris with an earth-shaking rumble, still in hot pursuit.

"Argh!" Claire launched flaming arrows at the approaching beast. These were smaller than a flame spear, but

faster, and they surrounded the monster, exploding on impact.

But Chimera continued to bear down on us, seemingly unaffected by the arrows.

“Freeze!” I trapped Chimera’s massive body in a huge block of ice.

“What is this crazy magic?” Claire demanded.

“I’ll muster up anything to save you, Miss Claire.” My reply was lighthearted, but we weren’t safe yet. The monster’s lion head breathed fire, reducing the ice to water in a matter of seconds.

“Can’t you freeze it to its core?”

“That would take too long, and I think the water attribute tail would remain unaffected,” I said. “Miss Claire… for the first time in our lives, let’s work together.”

“What should I do?” Claire answered seriously; she knew this wasn’t the time for jokes.

“Like Thane did before, I’ll use my water attribute to boost your magic, so aim for the head.”

“Won’t Chimera just deflect the attack with his tail again?”

“Can you call up your special move from the Academy Knights selection exam?”

“I see… But I have to gather my magic a bit to cast that.”

“I’ll buy us time. Get started.”

Claire smiled fearlessly. “Are you saying I should trust you?”

“If you can.”

“Hmph! Well, fine.”

And that was that. All that remained for me to do was support Claire with everything I had.

“Flame!” Claire materialized countless small fire bullets and fired them at Chimera, peppering the goat torso. The

monster kept advancing, unaffected. He opened his jaws to breathe fire—and I cast my magic.

"Freeze!" As before, Chimera was encased in ice, momentarily frozen. "Now, Miss Claire."

Claire stretched her arms out to her sides. Four spectral images of the François family crest appeared in the air around her as the ice encasing the monster began to shudder and break.

"Light!"

The light of the four crests swallowed the incoming fire breath, turning it into a puff of smoke. Claire's Magic Ray cascaded down Chimera's open jaws, filling his throat, and searing through his entire body.

With a terrible cry, the giant collapsed. This time, he didn't move again.

"We did it!"

"Good job. I knew you had it in you, Miss Claire."

In that moment of relief, when the tension between Claire and I dissolved for once—we were caught off guard.

"Very impressive. You have proven yourself, young lady."

The black-masked man appeared as if out of nowhere and swung a knife at Claire.

"Miss Claire!"

***

For one terrible moment, I thought it was over. But the blade that should have killed Claire was blocked by a powerful arm.

"Master Thane!"

"That was close…"

The black-masked man's knife was embedded in Thane's arm. Fresh blood dripped from the wound.

"Well now, what do we have here? A disgraced prince?"

"Insurgent." Thane answered the masked man's words with a magic-empowered fist. The man dodged, but the blow grazed him, knocking his mask to the ground. I tried to catch a glimpse of his naked face as he swiftly covered it with his hands.

"Ha. I thought I had you all figured out, but you still had a little something up your sleeve."

"The army will be here soon. You should surrender."

There were skilled mages in the army, but Thane's body-reinforcing wind magic was in a league of its own. He'd probably arrived first because he could outrun them—though it was still absurd to let a prince go ahead by himself.

"Is that right? Then I guess I'll just have to make a run for it," said the masked man. As before, his bright, cheerful tone was jarring, given the situation.

"You think you can escape?"

"I'll figure something out. Besides, it looks like I got what I wanted, doesn't it?"

We stared at him, not understanding what he meant.

"My goal was to kill as many nobles as possible, but… something even better, something I'd never expected, has fallen into my hands."

As I tried to wrap my head around what he meant, Thane suddenly cried out and fell to his knees.

"Master Thane?!"

Thane. Claire rushed to his side.

"It was…poison…?"

"Correct. A special new poison for which no antidote exists. Please, savor it."

The man spat these words with joyful abandon as he disappeared into the darkness of night.

“Master Thane! Master Thane!” Claire clung to the fallen Thane and called his name. But there was no response. His breathing was labored, his forehead was slick with sweat, and he let out painful moans. Ominous black spots had formed on his skin.

“Call for a doctor! Call a doctor now!”

“Miss Claire, please step away.”

“But, Master Thane…!”

“It’s okay. I think I can neutralize it.” Somehow, I managed to pry the utterly distraught Claire from the man she loved, who was on the brink of death, and called up my detoxifying water magic.

“The spots!”

Under the touch of my magic, the black splotches on Thane’s skin faded. He remained unconscious, but his breathing began to even out.

“So, it was poison from the Nur Empire,” I said.

“What?! Is that where that man was from?!”

I nodded. The Nur Empire was a powerful nation that bordered the Bauer Kingdom to the east. A number of the game’s events were instigated by this enemy nation, including, in the second half of the game, the use of a poison called cantarella. There was a fan theory that cantarella was actually the poison known as arsenous acid in our world, which no one had yet figured out how to isolate as a pure material. But the heroine eventually determined the steps to magically neutralize the poison in the game, so I knew how to treat Thane.

“How do you know that?” Claire asked.

“No comment.”

“And why were you alone in the lab? It’s like you knew Lene and her brother would betray us.”

“I was suspicious of Lambert. Lene really surprised me, though.” I gave Claire a blend of truth and lies. Though she was single-minded, she wasn’t stupid, so I’d have to tread carefully if I wanted to trick her.

“Are you—” she started, but just then, Thane began to rouse. “Master Thane!”

“Claire… Is that you…? You’re safe. Good.”

“What are you talking about?! You were in danger… What would we have done if something happened to you?!” Claire clung to him, tears running down her face. Thane looked like he wasn’t sure what to do, but he finally held her back, stroking her hair.

“I’m sorry I worried you…”

“I… If you hadn’t woken up, then I…I…”

“I’m sorry…”

“Umm, I’m sorry to interrupt, but,” I said awkwardly to the couple, who were trying to take the spotlight from the heroine (me). “How about we move somewhere else? It’s cold here.”

“You…” Claire glared at me like she wanted me to drop dead, but it was the truth: the spring night was cold in a way that wouldn’t do our patient any favors. It wasn’t because I was jealous of Thane. Not at all. Not me.

And that was that. The soldiers arrived to take the other men, Lambert, and Lene into custody, and the Academy Knights showed up to collect us, led by Rod. The truth about the insurgents hiding within the Commoner Movement was revealed in the days to come, causing the Movement to lose steam. There was still plenty of simmering dissatisfaction with the nobility, but the protests seemed to have subsided for now.

The Academy had taken some significant damage. Claw marks were starkly visible amidst the rubble, and the prevailing air on campus was one of quiet caution as workers

from the construction guild carried in lumber and bricks for repairs.

Claire, meanwhile, was often listless. Even as Rod briefed the Academy Knights on the state of affairs at our next meeting, she was distracted, continually glancing to her left: the spot where Lene usually stood, always waiting for her.

Lene and Lambert had been arrested for treason. They might have been blackmailed, but the fact remained that they had assisted a foreign invasion and been accessories to the attempted murder of aristocrats *and* a member of the royal family—dire charges even for nobles, and the Aurousseaus were commoners. The best-case scenario was that Lene and Lambert would be sentenced to death, and the worst-case scenario was that the entire family would face execution. Their assets had been seized, their contracts for the management of magical stones revoked, and the whole family now waited for the king to pronounce judgment.

"Will the Aurousseau family be…executed?" Claire asked Rod.

"It's likely. I'm sure they had their reasons, but this is just too serious to overlook."

"That's true…"

The meeting room was silent. It wasn't just Claire's affection for Lene turning their stomachs; the Academy Knights had liked and trusted Lambert.

"Oh yeah! Claire and Rae, it seems you're going to be rewarded," Rod said, trying to dispel the gloom.

"Rewarded?"

"Of course! You identified the true culprits, *and* you took down Chimera. Rae even saved Prince Thane's life."

"I expect you'll be summoned to the Royal Palace soon. His Majesty wants to present your reward in person," Yu chimed in.

"I really didn't do much—" Claire started.

“Oh, is that so? That would be a tremendous honor,” I interjected, cutting her off.

“Excuse you!” Claire snapped.

“Miss Claire, I have an idea.” I lowered my voice even further, whispering into her ear so no one else could hear.

“I see… I think it’s worth trying.”

“Right?”

Just as Yu projected, we were summoned to the Royal Palace a few days later.

***

It was my first visit to the Royal Palace. We passed through a majestic gate and walked along soft, expensive carpeting as we were shown to the waiting room. The king met with dozens of people every day. Claire and I were the only ones present in that room at the moment, but there had to be numerous other vestibules where people were waiting for audiences, too.

“Sit down. You’re being restless.” Claire was probably used to this. She was sipping tea and showed not the slightest sign of anxiety.

“I was just thinking that rooms in the palace are completely unlike anywhere else.”

“Naturally. The Royal Palace represents the pinnacle of the kingdom’s culture. Everything in it is made from materials of the highest grade—for example, this table is probably mahogany.”

“Heh…”

It all just looked expensive to me. The finer aesthetics of wealth were wasted on me, like casting pearls before swine, or preaching to deaf ears… Well, you get the gist.

“Thank you for loaning me clothes,” I told Claire as she returned her teacup to the saucer.

I’d planned to appear before the king in my uniform, since I was a student, but Claire had panicked when I told her as much. She’d rushed to find me something more appropriate, which turned out to be a pantsuit in formal black, with long sleeves. Apparently, there was an extensive dress code that stipulated what you could wear to a royal audience.

Claire was clad in an elegant dress—not an evening gown, but a conservative day dress that covered most of her skin, with an ankle-length skirt. I wore my outfit awkwardly, but Claire’s fit her like a glove. I suppose it went without saying that she was a noble, and it showed.

“I didn’t do it for you. I couldn’t have my maid’s lack of dress sense reflect badly on me with His Majesty.”

“That’s a nice excuse. I know you love me.”

“I really wish you would just shut up.” Despite the retort, Claire’s expression was satisfied and confident.

Eventually, an attendant came to fetch us. We walked down the palace corridor, stepping carefully on the plush red carpet. Claire walked with ease, despite her long-hemmed dress and high heels. Before long, we came to a ceremonial set of doors.

“I present Claire François and Rae Taylor!”

When the attendant announced our names, the intricately embellished door swung open. The man bowed to us, and Claire and I stepped into the room, keeping our heads down. On the throne before us sat King l’Ausseil and his queen, Riche, flanked on either side by guards and soldiers.

The attendant who’d escorted us approached the throne and then dropped to his knees, bowing deeply. Claire had grilled me on the necessary etiquette the night before, so I supposed I could give the “ve-Rae nice to meet you” joke a rest, just this once.

“Let me see your faces.” His Majesty’s heavy voice resounded through the room, giving us permission to look

upon him and the Queen.

King l'Ausseil had black hair and black eyes. He reminded me of Rod, though not as vivacious, of course. His posture and presence brought to mind the kings you saw in a deck of cards, but more beautiful still. The crown upon his head glistened.

Queen Riche, meanwhile, had golden hair and blue eyes, good looks she had clearly passed to Yu. Her long hair was pulled back and the silver tiara on her head shone bright. She was covering her mouth with a fan, so I couldn't read her facial expression.

"I am told you took the lead in resolving a series of incidents at the Royal Academy," said the king. "You have done well."

We lowered our eyes again at his words of appreciation.

"I also hear you saved my son Thane's life. In gratitude for the great service you have done our land, I shall bestow upon you a fitting reward. Name your desire."

At that, we lifted our heads again.

"We are Claire François and Rae Taylor. It is our honor and delight to meet you today," Claire spoke. We'd agreed beforehand that she would handle this part; it hardly seemed proper for a commoner like me to address His Majesty.

"Mmm," His Majesty nodded encouragingly.

"As our reward, we have but one request of Your Majesty."

"Let me hear it."

"Yes."

This was the crucial moment. *You got this, Claire*.

"We beg that the lives of the Aurousseau family be spared."

A stir ran through the room at Claire's words, as was only to be expected.

“Silence,” His Majesty bellowed, and the room fell quiet once again.

The king was silent himself for a few moments and then spoke. “It is my understanding that the Aurousseaus were the primary culprits in what occurred. You would request their sentence be reduced?”

“I would. I humbly request that Your Majesty pardon them,” Claire repeated in response to the king’s flat, unreadable words.

“Salas, what say you?”

When addressed by the king, the chancellor stepped forward from beside the throne. This was Salas Lilium, a handsome man with silver hair and red eyes.

“This is difficult. Rewarding good behavior and punishing poor conduct is the principle of the kingdom’s law. There is no reason to commute the sentence of the Aurousseaus,” Salas answered flatly.

“The Aurousseaus have served this country faithfully until now. Their contributions, especially in the magical stone business, cannot be overlooked. I humbly request, once again, the pardon of Your Majesty.” Claire desperately pressed her appeal. This was our only chance to save Lene and Lambert’s lives.

“It is true that the Aurousseaus have served us well. Is it possible to commute their sentence in consideration of such merit, Salas?” the king mused.

“The crimes they committed include colluding with foreign invaders and the attempted murder of royalty and nobility. These are crimes too great to be offset by prior achievement and can only be answered by the destruction of the house,” Salas replied coldly.

“So be it. Do you have another request?”

We’d failed. Claire’s face was pale, her hands clenched into fists.

“Your Majesty, is there any way you can fulfill their requests?” said a familiar voice.

Thane had entered through a side door and now stood beside Claire.

“The incidents at the Academy were fueled by the general populace’s resentment of the ruling class. The courtyard incident, which led to the riots, invited criticism that the government unduly favors aristocrats.” Thane’s voice was clear and resonant. I’d never heard him speak like this before. “The Commoner Movement has subsided now that it’s been proven the Aurousseaus were at fault. But if the royal family does not prove itself capable of passing fair and impartial judgment on commoners, we will inevitably see a similar backlash.”

“Are you saying that sparing the lives of the Aurousseau family will prevent such dissatisfaction?”

“Yes…I am.”

“Your Majesty, Master Thane, with all due respect,” Salas interrupted, “the Aurousseaus are suspected of exacerbating the Commoner Movement. The royal family does not disregard commoners, but the aristocrats who were endangered by the Aurousseaus will not let this pass.”

He wasn’t wrong. The masked man’s goal had been to kill a noble child. If Chimera had been allowed to rampage unchecked through the Academy, he would have been successful.

“The issue is one of balance. The scales of the king’s favor are currently tipped toward the aristocrats. Considering the importance of magic, it is clear we must tip those scales further toward the commoners’ favor to balance them. Please reconsider this, if for no other reason than to keep Your Majesty’s meritocratic policy from becoming a dead letter.” Thane fell silent, his case made.

“I understand both of your arguments.” The king fell silent as well, deep in thought.

A few minutes passed, though they felt like an eternity. We waited to hear the king's pronouncement.

"The Aurousseaus shall be deported," His Majesty finally said. Claire and I looked at each other in relief.

"Your Majesty, with all due respect—"

"Salas, I have spoken."

"Understood," Salas reluctantly fell back in line.

"Claire François, Rae Taylor. You are excused."

"Yes."

"Thane, you will stay. I have something to discuss with you."

"Yes, sir…"

Claire and I left the room.

We stayed silent for a while, even once we'd walked out of the palace. Once we were past the gates, though, I couldn't hold it in anymore.

"We did it!"

"Hurrah!"

Claire and I pumped our fists in the air in unrehearsed synchrony. She looked at me looking back at her and quickly dropped her fist.

"Hmph! Would you stop copying me?"

"It's like we're reading each other's minds. That's a wondrous thing; let's be happy."

"I don't see why we have to be happy together."

"Then let's just love each other."

"What are you talking about?!"

And we were back to normal once more, with the slight difference that Claire was talking more than she typically did. We made our chattier-than-usual way back to the Academy.

***

On the day the Aurousseaus were banished, I accompanied Claire to a point on the kingdom's border with the mountainous Alpes. This border crossing would be the one Lene and her brother used as they were expelled from the kingdom.

The Aurousseau family fortune had mostly been confiscated, leaving them only the bare necessities for their move to the Alpes, where they would rely on family. The Alpes were part of a friendly nation with a long history of diplomatic accord with the Bauer Kingdom. It was an agricultural region with fertile land, and politically stable, if not wealthy. A good place to start over in.

In contrast to our melancholy state, the weather was beautiful, not a cloud in the sky. Claire dragged her parasol listlessly along the ground.

"The weather is nice," I said.

"Yes, it is," she replied indifferently. She was staring at the border crossing.

The crossing itself consisted of a building that had been constructed over the largest road connecting the Alpes and the Bauer Kingdom; it was equipped with a massive, sturdy gate that could be locked in case of emergency. The checkpoint was inside the building, and the Aurousseaus were currently going through it. They'd dealt in magical stones in the Bauer Kingdom, but it was forbidden to take that technology outside the country, so their possessions and documents were undoubtedly being thoroughly searched.

"I wonder if the Aurousseaus will be all right in the Alpes."

"I've heard their father, Bartley, is a competent man. He may not get them back to where they used to be, but I'm sure he'll do just fine," Claire answered matter-of-factly, but her tone was somber, somewhat distant.

"It'll be worse for Lene and Lambert."

“Yes…”

Their forbidden love had nearly gotten their entire family killed. The Aurousseau family would disown Lene and Lambert once they’d migrated to the Alpes, forcing them to rebuild their lives alone in a new country without any support. In a world where most people inherited the family business, the implications of this were severe.

“All they can do is keep living. As long as they are alive, things will work out.” It sounded almost like Claire was trying to convince herself. As if she were willing it to be true.

“It looks like their inspection is over.”

The Aurousseau family moved toward the gate as we watched from just outside the fence surrounding the compound. Almost everyone the Aurousseau employed had been fired, leaving only the twenty or so family members to make the journey unassisted.

Among them were Lene and Lambert.

“Lene!” I called, running up to the iron fence. Lene approached from the other side.

“I’m sorry, Rae…and Miss Claire, too…”

“Miss Claire said she wanted to say goodbye.”

“I said no such thing. You insisted on bringing me along, no matter what I did.”

“Ah ha ha… It’s been a while, but I’m relieved to see you two are the same as always,” Lene giggled. Her laugh sounded weak. I understood.

There was a slight pause.

“Lene, do you resent me?” Claire asked timidly.

“Nothing of the sort!” Lene was flustered. “It was only fair that my family be punished. It’s thanks to you begging His Majesty for mercy that we’re even alive, now.”

“But I was the one who caught you,” Claire said, with only a hint of self-deprecation.

“No. I am grateful to you for stopping our violence.”

“My sister and I realize what we have done.” Lambert came over to join us, wearing a distressed look. “They say love is blind. Ours narrowed our vision, and this is the result. That man exploited my feelings to make me do his will.”

Lene nodded. “Rae, be careful. Don’t let anyone use the feelings you have for Miss Claire.”

“I won’t.”

“Lambert, Lene. It’s time. Let’s go,” someone from the family called.

“Lene, take this with you.” I handed Lene a bundle of parchment through the fence.

“This is…?!”

“They’re new recipes. Remember to use the mayonnaise.”

“Are you sure?”

“Mm-hmm. I think it’ll earn you some seed money.” This was all I could do for her now.

“Farewell, then. Miss Claire, Rae, thank you for everything.”

“Bye, Lene,” I said. Claire remained silent.

Lene smiled sadly and turned away. She and Lambert headed to rejoin their family.

“Miss Claire,” I said. “You don’t want to say goodbye?”

She didn’t answer. Claire had a conflicted look on her face, clearly processing a whirlwind of emotions. In that moment, I saw her for so much more than something as simple as a villainess.

“Lene!” Claire suddenly called. Lene turned in surprise. “I won’t say goodbye. I’ll see you again someday. Until then, stay healthy!”

I thought I saw Lene smile but couldn’t be sure. Maybe I just wanted to believe that was what I’d seen. They kept

walking, and eventually, she and Lambert were gone from our sight.

Claire was silent again, but her eyes were dry.

“Miss Claire,” I said.

“What is it?”

“Can I hug you?”

“Of course not. I’m going home.” Claire turned away and walked ahead of me.

“You needn’t be so stubborn in times like this.” People are far more complicated than a book or a game can ever really depict. And I love that about them, especially the awkward ones. “Misssss Claaaaaire!”

“Aggh?! What are you doing?! Let go of me!”

“I won’t let you go, but I’ll let you talk.”

“Stop talking nonsense!”

Curse me all you like, Claire. Return to being your normal, happy self, if you can. And if you can’t—

“It’s okay to cry, you know?”

“D-don’t be stupid. I just lost a maid. Why would I cry over something like—”

“Miss Claire, I’m behind you right now. I can’t see your face.”

“I told you!”

I stayed where I was, embracing her from behind. “You didn’t want Lene to leave,” I said.

A few drops of water hit my hands, which were wrapped around her.

“Things don’t always turn out how you want. Even falling in love isn’t free.”

More teardrops. My hands were getting wet. We stayed there like that for a little longer.

“You really are cheeky for a peasant…” Claire said.

“Yes, I’m cheeky. You should punish me.”

“No. You’d just consider that a reward, wouldn’t you?”

“Miss Claire, you know me so well. Our only choice now is to get married!”

“I will not!”

And with that, we really were back to normal. I walked by Claire’s side, happy to receive her sharp words.

“I hope we can see her again,” I said looking back at the border crossing.

“I’m sure we will.” Claire’s voice was no longer clouded over. Instead, it echoed as clearly as the blue sky stretched above us.

Bonus Chapter:
My Lady, Claire François

"LENE, ARE YOU READY?" my brother said to me once I'd bid farewell to Rae and Miss Claire.

"Yes. The longer we linger, the harder it will be to say goodbye."

Secretly, I regretted not apologizing to Miss Claire in my own words. The crimes that my brother and I had committed were unforgivable, and I thought it would be presumptuous of me to even try. Besides, of course, apologies are more for the culprit's benefit than the victim's…

But my heart was so overburdened by guilt that, in the end, I couldn't even give her a proper goodbye. My soul was overshadowed.

"Lene!"

The wind brought the unmistakable voice of my Lady to my ears. I turned back instinctively.

"I won't say goodbye. I'll see you again someday. Until then, stay healthy!"

I was sure that no one, not even my beloved brother, could understand how those words made me feel. I was just a servant—just one of Miss Claire's *many* servants—and yet she had such kind words for me, someone who had viciously betrayed her. In that moment, I was more grateful than ever for her compassionate heart.

"She was a good Lady." My brother smiled gently at me. I shook my head in disagreement.

"Not past tense. Miss Claire is, and will always be, my Lady," I said, wiping a tear from my eye.

My brother just said, "I see," and stroked my hair.

I had served Miss Claire ever since we were children. As we walked away, my head swirled with memories of the ten years we'd walked side by side. Of course, our relationship hadn't always been all sunshine and sweetness. I thought back to when I'd met Miss Claire for the very first time, looking back at her faraway silhouette in the present.

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"This is Lene Aurousseau. Starting today, she will serve as Miss Claire's attendant. Lene, introduce yourself."

"My name is Lene Aurousseau. I am pleased to meet you."

"Hmm… I don't care about your name. I'm sure you'll quit in a week, anyway." Miss Claire was two or three years younger than me, and I was seven. She spoke like a much older girl, her spiral curls bouncing cutely as she trained a grumpy expression on me. She was adorable and would have been even cuter if she smiled.

"Now then, Miss Claire, Lene will take care of you. Please excuse me."

With that, the senior maid left the room. I would discover later that Miss Claire wasn't fond of the senior maid and that the feeling was mutual. It wasn't just the senior maid, either. Most of the maids serving the François household disliked Miss Claire, and my first impression wasn't exactly the best, either.

"Commoner."

"My name is Lene, Miss Claire."

"I told you, I don't care about your name. Commoner, turn into a horse."

"A…horse?"

I take back what I said. My first impression of her was *horrible*.

I was a commoner, just as Miss Claire said, the eldest daughter of the Aurousseaus, who dealt in magical stones. The Aurousseaus, which did most of their business with the royal family, were commoners, but also wealthy merchants. We had enough assets that our standard of living was actually higher than some lower-tier nobles. I didn't plan to get haughty about it, but I didn't like being ridiculed for my commoner status on my first day of service.

But whether I liked it or not, my father had gone to great pains to explain to me that my service would strengthen the bonds between our company and House François. And, if I did my job well, it might benefit my brother.

My brother, Lambert Aurousseau, was exceptional. His magical talent had made itself evident at a young age and even earned him an invitation to study at the Royal Academy, which was just beginning to open its doors to commoners. I had deep respect for my brother. I would gladly watch over a selfish young lady if it might benefit him even the slightest bit.

"You don't know what a horse is? Stupid commoner…"

"No, I know what a horse is. But why?"

"Because I want to ride a horse. Shut up and get on all fours."

Claire, who was several inches shorter than me, stared up at me as she called me stupid. It would have been easy to give in, but if I gave her everything she asked for, her demands would only escalate.

"Miss Claire, please forgive me for not turning into a horse."

"Wh-what did you say…?" Claire's voice became even grumpier. "Are you saying you won't follow my orders?"

"Yes."

"You!"

Seeing she was about to launch into a temper tantrum, I said, "I cannot allow someone as noble as Miss Claire to ride on the back of someone as lowly as me."

By faking humility, I could stroke Miss Claire's ego while also bringing her around to my point of view. As a merchant's daughter, I'd been raised to handle aristocrats and had a number of such tricks in my repertoire.

"Hmph! Well, maybe you're not so stupid, for a commoner." Miss Claire seemed satisfied with my answer, at least for the time being. I hoped it wouldn't be as difficult to control the selfish lady as I originally thought. "You may actually have some promise. Good. I will allow you to be my attendant for now."

"You have my gratitude."

And such was the first time Miss Claire and I met.

It took me a while to master the art of Miss Claire's curls. She was a selfish little girl who gave the many maids who diligently tended her no end of grief, but somehow, I could manage her better than most. I was paid exceptionally well for my service, and gradually, I gained Miss Claire's trust.

During this time, I learned a number of things about the François household. Miss Claire's parents, Master Dole and Madam Melia, left the house often. I supposed that was natural for Master Dole, the Minister of Finance, but Madam Melia rarely came home, either. She was a popular socialite, a social butterfly who pulled strings behind the scenes and was said to be Master Dole's right hand.

Since they were gone so often, they spoiled Claire rotten when they were around. If Miss Claire said she liked strawberries, for example, they would upend the functioning of farms and cold-storage facilities to ensure she had a constant supply of strawberries throughout the year. With no one around to give her honest advice, Miss Claire grew into a more selfish young lady by the day.

Not long after I became Miss Claire's attendant, the house filled with the hubbub of preparing for Miss Claire's fourth birthday party. Servants rushed to mail out invitations,

design the menu, and decorate the rooms. My main job was to stay by Miss Claire's side. There was already an implicit understanding among the attendants that handling Miss Claire was primarily my task.

It was natural, therefore, that I accompanied Miss Claire when she went shopping. Miss Claire could have anything she wanted brought to her room, but she sometimes liked to go to the store on her own. On this particular day, she'd brought us to a boutique she frequented. However, she wasn't shopping for herself. She was shopping for me.

"Um, Miss Claire, I don't mind wearing a servant's clothing…"

"No. I refuse to accept that my attendant does not own a single dress!" Miss Claire said. On her instructions, the store employees brought out a wide selection of clothing. I had dresses at my parents' home, but they were made for a commoner. I thought my heart would fly out of my chest when I saw these glittering gowns for the first time.

Perhaps that was why I forgot I didn't belong there.

"Hey, why's there a commoner here?"

Just as Claire vanished into the back of the store with the clerk to select other clothes, I heard a voice behind me. I turned to see a man who seemed to be an aristocrat from another country.

"This store is for nobles. Commoner, go away." The foreign aristocrat shooed me away with his large hands.

Frightened, I backed away and tripped, falling on my rear end. I knocked a rack of clothing down with me, sending a number of items worth several years of my salary to the ground. Horrified by what I'd done, I could only cower.

"Well, hello, Your Highness Darcel. Pardon me, I didn't see you come in."

"Shopkeep, this commoner is unsightly. Dispose of her. Unsightly."

“I apologize, but…she is here with an aristocrat of the Bauer Kingdom.”

“I won’t say it again. Unsightly.”

It seemed that the arrogant Master Darcel wanted me gone, no matter what. And, judging by the way the shopkeeper addressed him, he wasn’t just an aristocrat but a member of a royal family. I decided it would be best if I just left.

But before I could…

“Your Royal Highness of Loro, has my servant done something to offend you?” Miss Claire came back, speaking fluently in a foreign language.

“You can speak Loronese? How impressive, for such a young child.”

“Much obliged, Your Highness. I am Claire François, daughter of Dole François, Minister of Finance of the Bauer Kingdom.”

“Ah, Dole’s daughter. I see. No wonder you are so well behaved and educated.”

“Thank you very much,” Miss Claire was having a casual conversation with royalty several times her age. All I could do was stare.

“However, Claire, it is inappropriate of you to bring a commoner into this store. My nation, Loro, has invested in this establishment with the intent that it will cater exclusively to aristocrats. Commoners must not be allowed inside.”

“Your Highness, have you heard of the new policy that King l’Ausseil plans to launch in the Bauer Kingdom?” Miss Claire asked.

“What?” Master Darcel cocked his head to the side.

“His Majesty l’Ausseil means to introduce new laws that will elevate and educate commoners. Perhaps this shop of yours, Master Darcel, will fall behind the times if it only caters to aristocrats.”

“How… Does King Bauer intend to bestow his grace on commoners, as well?”

“Exactly so,” Claire said. It hadn’t been made public yet, but a number of high nobles and the royal family knew of the meritocratic policy, including, of course, the François household. “I apologize, but I am practicing what the kingdom will soon enforce. This is my test subject.”

“Oh…is that right? Well, if Bauer intends to introduce such laws, Loro will not stand in its way. I will overlook this incident.”

“Thank you very much, Your Majesty.”

And with that, the encounter came to an end. Somehow, Claire had brought it to a peaceful conclusion.

“It’s fine. I won’t come to this store again,” she whispered to me as we left the store.

“Um… I’m sorry, Miss Claire. I was a coward…”

“Argh! That stupid royal family really makes me angry!”

“Oh, um… Miss Claire?”

“Loro is living in the past! They’re scum who couldn’t stand on two feet without Bauer’s support!”

“S-scum?!”

“And that scum dares to sneer at my belongings? If my father’s reputation wasn’t on the line, I would have slapped him right then and there!”

“What do you mean, your belongings?”

“Huh? I’m talking about you, Lene. You belong to me, don’t you? I won’t let that piece of royal scum hurt what belongs to me,” Claire said, staring at me. “Listen, Lene, you are my…you are Claire François’ servant. That makes you the most important commoner in the country. Have pride in that.”

The words echoed strangely through my heart. There was no doubt that Miss Claire was a selfish girl, a spoiled and beautiful aristocrat. But she was more than that. Once she

decided you were part of her family, she would protect you at all costs.

In that moment, I decided that I wanted to stay with her.

“I, Lene Aurousseau, swear to become a servant worthy of Miss Claire.”

“Good. Give it your best!”

That was when my relationship with Miss Claire began to change.

On the morning of Miss Claire’s birthday party, an unexpected problem arose.

“I’m sorry, Claire. Your father and I have something that we simply cannot reschedule,” Miss Claire’s mother, Melia, said with heartfelt disappointment. They’d stayed home the night before, which was rare for them, to ensure they had no problems making it to their daughter’s birthday party. However, when the day itself came, they received a summons from a fellow aristocrat they couldn’t afford to ignore.

“No! Father and Mother must stay with me! Today is my birthday!” Miss Claire, who had been looking forward to spending time with her parents after not seeing them in a while, was naturally upset.

“Claire, don’t give your mother trouble. This is our duty as nobles,” Master Dole chided, but he was clearly upset, too.

“You always leave me alone… And now you won’t even come to my birthday…?” Miss Claire said, tears rolling down her face. The loneliness in her voice pulled on my heartstrings.

“I am so very sorry, Claire. I’ll make it up to you. That’s right! I’ll buy you anything you desire, Claire, anything at all. What would you like?” The look on Melia’s face suggested she thought she’d come up with an amazing idea, but I cringed internally.

“I don’t need a present! I hate you, Mother!” Miss Claire shouted. She turned on her heel and ran in the direction

of her room.

"Claire…" Madam Melia watched her go with a sad look on her face, shoulders slumped.

"Claire will understand someday," Master Dole soothed his wife. "An aristocrat's duty takes precedence over everything, even family."

"I know, and yet…sometimes I wonder if she wouldn't have been happier if she weren't born a noble," Madam Melia said faintly. "Lene, please take care of Claire. Cheer her up, somehow."

"Yes, ma'am. Have a safe trip, Madam, Master."

I said goodbye to them and headed to Miss Claire's room. After knocking three times, I tried the handle. As I'd expected, it wasn't locked.

"Miss Claire?"

"My father and mother have left, haven't they?"

Her voice was full of loneliness. I wanted to run up to Miss Claire and hug her, but the difference in our statuses didn't allow such a thing.

Claire had been waiting with the door unlocked. She'd been hoping her parents would come after her. It was a childish, selfish thing to do, of course, but I understood how she felt.

"Master and Madam really want to be with you, Miss Claire."

"I wonder…I wonder if my father and mother wish they had a boy."

At those words, I realized the true nature of Miss Claire's anxiety. Miss Claire feared she was an insufficient heir. No four-year-old should be worrying about such things on her birthday, but Miss Claire had already thoroughly internalized the rules and values of the aristocrat's world.

"No, not at all. Master and Madam are truly happy to have you for a daughter."

“If that’s true, then why won’t they celebrate my birthday with me?”

I had no answer for that innocent question. I could have recited the duties of aristocrats, but they weren’t what Miss Claire needed to hear. She wasn’t challenging the logic of the aristocracy but the desires of the heart.

“Leave me. I want to be alone,” Miss Claire murmured when I said nothing. With nothing else I could do, I left the room.

The birthday party began that night. The guest of honor, Miss Claire, appeared with a smile, like the morning’s incident had never happened. “Thank you, everyone,” she told the servants. “You have my heartfelt gratitude for putting together such a wonderful party for me.”

The smile was entirely for her attendants. There were still many servants who disliked Claire, but I no longer agreed with them. You were supposed to be selfish when you were four years old. You were still the center of your own world at that age, and besides, how many children could set their personal sorrow aside to play the hostess the way Miss Claire just had, at that tender age?

“Happy birthday, Miss Claire. This is from all your attendants.” I presented a gift to Miss Claire.

“Really? Can I open it?”

I nodded, and Miss Claire happily unwrapped it. “What a lovely brush!”

We had given Miss Claire a fancy brush with bristles made of fine, sturdy pig hair.

“But, it’s a bit big, isn’t it?”

“You will grow, Miss Claire, so it will be the perfect size someday. Until then—” I hesitated.

“Until then?”

“Until then, why don’t you use it to brush the Madam’s hair?”

Miss Claire wore a startled expression for a moment, clearly aware that I was implying she should make up with her mother.

“Oh, yes. I will do that,” she said at last, and grinned. I took this to mean that Miss Claire would be fine.

I was wrong.

“My Lady, it’s terrible!” A servant rushed into the party, her face pale. I recognized her as Madam Melia’s attendant.

“What is this commotion? If you have something to say, say it,” the senior maid said sharply.

“The Master and Madam’s carriage has been in an accident!”

“Father and Mother?!” Claire cried.

“Calm down, Miss Claire.” I took hold of Miss Claire to keep her calm, prompting the servant to continue.

Master Dole and Madam Melia had been invited to a party held by a powerful rival noble. While they were puzzled by the sudden invitation, their would-be-host’s social status left them unable to decline without giving offense, so they attended the party, where they were welcomed warmly enough to make them even more suspicious.

They eventually left, still puzzled. On their way home, however, their carriage collided with one belonging to a commoner.

“Are Father and Mother okay?”

“The Master was hurt, but his injuries are minor. But the Madam…”

“Mother?! What happened?!”

“Her condition is serious. The surgeons of the Spiritual Church are doing everything they can to save her.”

“Lene…”

“It will be okay. The Madam wouldn’t leave you, Miss Claire. Let’s trust in the protection of the spirits.” I didn’t know if I was trying to convince her or myself, but I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

And so, Claire’s fourth birthday party came to the worst possible end.

Madam Melia could not be saved. Her injuries were so severe that Miss Claire wasn’t even allowed to see her face again at the funeral. In the wake of her mother’s death, she shut down completely. Her selfishness disappeared, replaced with a sober maturity that made her seem like a different person entirely.

The François house was often filled with silence in those days. Miss Claire stayed in her room, gazing out the window. No matter what I said to her, it was like she was somewhere else—as if she would always be waiting for the Madam who had never come home.

That was just the beginning of her sorrow. Master Dole grew even busier consolidating support in Madam Melia’s absence, and Miss Claire was sent away to live with distant relatives. When she was told she was going to be separated from her father, too, she just nodded solemnly. It made me realize how long it had been since I had heard her voice.

“Miss Claire, How about some strawberries? You didn’t eat much breakfast. Aren’t you hungry?”

I showed Miss Claire a basket of strawberries, her favorite, but she just shook her head quietly, not even turning her eyes in my direction.

“Miss Claire… I won’t pretend to understand your pain or how you feel, but…if you don’t eat, you’ll get sick,” I said.

“If I were to die, I wonder if I could apologize to my mother,” Miss Claire said suddenly as if talking to herself. I was sure the words weren’t directed at me, but I couldn’t ignore them.

“I know you’re hurting, but please, don’t talk about dying. That would make the Madam sadder than anything.” I put the basket of strawberries on the table and sat by Miss Claire’s side. I thought it was dangerous to leave her alone right then.

Claire stared out the window as if she didn’t notice I was there, but finally, she spoke. “I told my mother I hated her.”

“I…” What could I do? How could I heal this wound?

“The last time I saw my mother, we were fighting…”

Her eyes were still dry, but she was obviously crying on the inside. Forgetting all about the difference in our status, I embraced Miss Claire. I didn’t care if I would be punished for disrespect; I was just afraid that if I let go of Miss Claire, I would lose her.

Someone… Please help this girl… Please save this delicate soul.

I didn’t pray to the God of the Spiritual Church, who had failed to return the Madam to Claire, but I prayed to someone, somewhere, that I didn’t know.

“Lene, Lene! I met a prince!”

My prayers were answered. Miss Claire slowly returned to being her old self, partly because, apparently, she’d met a “prince” at the house of the distant relatives she’d been sent to stay with. I didn’t know the details, but I was relieved to see her excitement.

“That’s wonderful. What is the name of this fated suitor?” I asked. I would have to thank him for saving the life of the person I now thought of as my own little sister.

“His name is Manaria! He is wonderful!”

I was stunned. Manaria was one of the daughters of the Larnach family—Melia’s family. A woman, not a prince, though she had short hair and was known to be tomboyish.

“Oh…is that so? Can you tell me all about Master Manaria?”

“Of course! Manaria is slim and has a beautiful face—”

I didn’t dare correct Miss Claire about Miss Manaria’s gender. She needed something to keep her mind occupied, and I was happy to let the misunderstanding continue if it brought her joy. There are people who will tell you that painkillers don’t address the root cause of pain. For my part, I believe that some wounds can’t wait to be healed.

Still, someday…

I prayed from the bottom of my heart that a real prince would appear before Claire. I hoped he would be as wonderful as Manaria and that he would make Miss Claire’s heart race.

At the time, I had no idea that Miss Claire’s savior would be not a prince but a strange commoner girl.

But that is another story for another time.

Afterword

THANK YOU SO MUCH for purchasing *I'm in Love with the Villainess*.

I'm the author, Inori. This volume consists of the final edited versions of the first three chapters that were posted to the *Let's Be Novelists* website, with a special addition at the end. Did you enjoy it?

Turning my novel into a published book has been my dream since I was a child, and even as I write this postscript, it still doesn't feel quite real. I am so grateful to both the readers of the web novel and those who first read this story in book form. Your opinions and comments give me such encouragement as an author.

I have some acknowledgments to make.

First, Nakamura-san of the GL Bunko editorial department, who put the greatest effort into publishing this book. Thank you for your patience with me, a complete newbie to publishing.

Hanagata, thank you for the wonderful illustrations. It is no exaggeration to say that your art brought Rae and Claire to life.

To my partner, Aki—you are the reason this book exists. I dedicate this book to you.

And finally, to every reader who has picked up this book—I offer you my deepest gratitude.

—INORI, JANUARY 31, 2019

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